

# CATS & CRAYONS



**LEA  
WASSIE**

# **Cats & Crayons**

(Adriana Island Cats - Book Four)

By

Lea Tassie

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Mega purrs and tail twitches to  
Sharon King-Booker

All animals except man know that the ultimate point of life is to enjoy it.  
(Samuel Butler)

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## Chapter I -- Squatters

When I lugged my laptop and a briefcase full of papers into the private party room at the back of The Yellow Duck, Duff and Joanna were already there. The first thing out of Duff's mouth was not his usual cheery hello but, "Holly, we've got more trouble with Brentwood Park."

"Oh, Duff, don't say that! What could go wrong that hasn't already?" I put my gear on the big round table and Joanna pushed a mug of coffee toward me. I'd been looking forward to the monthly meeting of Adriana Island's trustees and catching up on the gossip, but the other two were looking worried. "On the phone last week, you told me the contractors were doing a great job."

"They are." Duff's white grocer's smock was open, and he sat back in his chair, hands resting on his ample stomach. "Or they were. The plumbing and wiring are done, and the work's been inspected and passed. The Carlsons were supposed to start painting and wallpapering this last Monday."

"So, what's the problem?" In cooperation with the Adriana Heritage Society, we were repairing the old Brentwood farmhouse, now nearly eighty years old, so it could be used partly as a museum to commemorate the history of Adriana Island and partly as a tourist bureau office.

"Squatters." Duff said the word as if it had dirt on it.

"Squatters? Is that all?" I opened my laptop. "They couldn't possibly be as difficult to deal with as Trevor Brentwood." Trevor's mother, Norma Brentwood, had deeded the old farm, a hundred and sixty acres, to Adriana with the stipulation that it would be kept as a park forever. Trevor, a wealthy surgeon living in Victoria, had done everything in his power, including a lawsuit, to get the property for himself. Not because he had fond memories of family life there, but so he could develop it and make more money.

"You're right about that." Joanna ran a hand through her short, wavy gray hair. "I don't think anybody will ever forget what he did when he lost the lawsuit."

I knew I wouldn't forget; Norma had been a dear friend. When she died, six months ago, Trevor had arranged to have a moving truck strip absolutely everything out of the house. We all thought he was salvaging what little money he could to make up for losing the land, but we were wrong. He sent it all to the dump: Norma's clothes, family photographs and treasures, furniture, linen, books, even the fridge and freezer and all the food in them. My mother-in-law, who had been living with and looking after Norma at the time, was left stranded with no vehicle, no power, no water, and no food, not even for Norma's four animals. He'd taken the cat carriers, too.

"Well," Duff said, "it's for sure the squatters don't have the money to start a lawsuit, but they're refusing to get out. The young guy says it's a park, and that parks are meant for people to use, and that they're just exercising their rights. They won't budge."

"Have you talked to Russ yet?" I asked. Corporal Russ Parsons was our local RCMP officer. "He'd probably love having something to do besides patrol for speeders and listen to Sarah Perkins complain about somebody trying to steal her dog off the back porch in the middle of the night."

"Does she really do that?" Joanna asked. She liked hearing about Adriana's eccentrics, so she could compare them to the ones living on her own island. One of the three trustees elected for each Gulf Island was always from a different island. Joanna's farm was on Melfort, five minutes away by speedboat when the sea was calm. When the wind was howling across the Strait of Georgia, her life was more complicated. Then she had to travel by ferry to the main

island, drive thirty kilometers south and take another ferry to Mora Bay to get to a meeting.

I took a welcome gulp of my coffee. "Apparently so. Russ is pretty sure what she hears are raccoons going up on the porch to steal the poor dog's food and water. But Sarah is convinced someone wants her pooch. I don't know why; he's so old and arthritic he can barely walk."

"Sounds like my next-door neighbor," Joanna said. "He complains about everything, but I think it's because he wants attention."

Duff cleared his throat. "To answer your question about Russ and the squatters, Holly, Russ isn't very keen. He could arrest them for trespass, but it seems ridiculous to put two healthy young people in jail when they haven't done any damage."

"Could we get a restraining order?" Joanna asked.

"I suppose so," Duff said, with a sigh. "But that would take forever. You know what the court system is like. And Betty Good is in a hurry. She found a bunch of period furniture for the place and she's anxious to get it out of her basement." Betty Good was president of the Adriana Heritage Society and a formidable organizer.

"Let's get the regular business out of the way." Joanna refilled her mug from the coffee carafe Mitch always provided for us. "I've got ewes ready to lamb and I'll have to go right home if one of the silly creatures decides to do something stupid."

After an hour of dealing with correspondence while I made hasty notes on the laptop, Duff looked at me. "I take it Ben doesn't want the use of Norma's big vegetable garden."

I shook my head. "He has enough to handle with our own garden and greenhouse. He said her garden wouldn't produce enough to make up for the cost of gas to run over there every day."

"Well, he'd know," Duff said, and grinned.

My husband's reputation as a former cost accountant who was still passionate about numbers and budgets was becoming well known.

"I'll get somebody to till it and seed it to grass then." Duff shuffled paper into his briefcase. "I spread the word about the garden but nobody else seems to want it either."

That wasn't surprising. Adriana had good soil and most people cultivated their own gardens. "I'll go dig up some of Norma's violas and California poppies and transplant them to my own place." It would be good to have those as a way of remembering her.

"You should have done that last fall," Joanna said.

"I know." I closed the laptop. "I meant to do a lot of things last fall and most of them still need doing."

Duff raised his eyebrows again. "Should you be the one to deal with plants, Holly?"

I sighed. My own reputation for having two black thumbs apparently was spreading as fast as Ben's reputation for strict budgets. "It'll have to be me. It's spring, you know. Ben's up to his ears in seeds and plants and fertilizer."

"Let's go out to the bar and have a beer and a hamburger." Duff pushed his chair back and rose. "Joanna? Surely another hour away from the woollies won't matter."

She glanced at her watch, then took her cell phone out of her jeans pocket and stared at it as if willing it to tell her the latest news. "Heather hasn't phoned, so I guess I can risk it."

We wandered out to the main room and found a table by a window overlooking the harbor. April sunlight sparkled on the water, and it was tempting to take a table outside on the deck, where we could listen to tiny waves splashing around the pilings underneath, admire the boats in the marina and watch cars come off the ferry from Vancouver Island. However, the April breeze was chilly, and the deck would be in shade for another hour.

"If you're going to Norma's to get plants," Duff said, after we'd heard all the news about his



niece and her husband renovating their house and I had reported all the latest disasters perpetrated by the six Siamese cats and one clumsy dog who ruled over Holly Haven, "how about seeing what you can do with the squatters? You're a writer. Surely you can come up with the magic words that will make them go away."

"Somebody certainly has to do it," I said, trying to sound a lot more confident than I felt. "We need to have that house operational as an office by the May long weekend." I paused for a sip of my own beer. "You said they were young. Any sign of drugs?"

Duff shook his head. "Not that I could see. Or smell. And the young man I talked to was very polite, but very firm in his opinions."

"I'll try. But if they won't listen to me, I don't think we have any choice but to get the RCMP involved." I leaned back while the waitress slid our food onto the table, the plates clinking against beer bottles and glasses and the mouth-watering aroma of hot beef and melted cheese rising to tantalize my taste buds. I didn't want to play the heavy, but I'd worried so much, and we'd worked so hard, to get Norma's property tied up forever as parkland, that nothing would make me back down now, even if the squatters were dirty, drugged, and belligerent to boot.

Mitch, the owner of the Yellow Duck, brought our coffee, then leaned his hands flat on the table, bent forward, and said in a low voice, "Duff, you hear what happened to your cousin Trevor?"

"I wish you wouldn't call him my cousin," Duff said. "That was purely an accident of birth. If the law allowed a person to disown his cousin, I'd do it."

"I was over in Victoria visiting," Mitch went on, ignoring Duff's quibble, "and my brother said Trevor had to apologize to the doctors he bad-mouthed before the hospitals would give him permission to use their operating rooms again."

"Oh, fantastic!" I was delighted. "He would absolutely hate that." Then I had another thought. "Where did your brother get that juicy bit?"

Mitch nodded at me. "Steve knows somebody who knows somebody who knows a doctor who used to play golf with Trevor at the Victoria Golf Club."

Of course. Why had I even bothered asking? Gossip traveled on Vancouver Island the same way it did on Adriana Island.

"I'm glad he got his comeuppance," Joanna said.

Mitch smiled. "That wasn't the only thing. The Medical Association slapped his wrist for overbilling, and he got an official reprimand and a fine. Steve didn't know how much, though."

"Good." I was smiling, too. "I guess he's not playing golf anymore."

"Yes, he is."

"But the Victoria Golf Club blackballed him because of how he treated Norma," I protested.

"More than one golf club in Victoria, Holly." Mitch picked up the beer bottles and glasses. "According to Steve's friend, he joined the Royal Colwood."

"Thanks, buddy," Duff said. "You have definitely made my day. Maybe my whole week."

Mitch went off to get rid of dirty glasses and we sorted out the lunch bill, then stood up and reached for jackets. I was surprised that Duff hadn't come up with one of his weird facts. He rarely missed.

"All right, girls," said Duff, "I bet you didn't know that tooth enamel is the hardest substance in the human body?"

Joanna snorted. "Not in Trevor's body, Duff. The hardest substance in his body is his heart." Her cell phone rang. "Oh, that's it! I knew it! There's trouble." She hurried out to the deck and down the steps to the wharf. We watched her leap into her runabout, back out of her parking slot

and zoom off across the water toward Melfort.

"Why is she in such a hurry?" Duff wondered. "She didn't even wait to find out if that was her niece calling."

"Maybe she never gets spam calls," I said.

Duff gave me an unbelieving look and buttoned his smock. "Tell Ben to give me a call, will you, Holly? I'm going to need more lettuce and green onions for the weekend."

I promised and walked on out to my car. Should I go to Norma's house now? No. If I intended to dig up plants as well as be an enforcer, I needed to change into my grubby clothes. If the squatters hadn't been impressed by Duff's capitalist persona, maybe they'd go for a woman of the soil.



The fifteen-minute drive to the east side of Adriana Island, where Ben and I lived on five acres or, as he insisted, two hectares, took much longer this time because I couldn't resist slowing down, even stopping once, to admire the pink froth of blossoms on Japanese ornamental cherry trees planted along the fence lines of small farms. It's always impossible, too, to hurry over the steep, forested hills that mark the center of the island, because the road meandering through the cedars and firs like the trail of a drunken cow is just one tight curve after another.

When I rattled across the cattle guard that separated our property from the road, Nicky, our white Samoyed, was sitting beside the carport waiting for me. He recognized the sounds different car engines made, which was something I couldn't do with my inferior human ears. I parked and he bounced up and down and grinned at me as though I'd been gone a month. To a visitor it would appear flattering, but I knew that he was waiting for the treat I usually gave him when I came home. I reached behind the passenger seat for the bag of dog yummys and armed myself with a biscuit before I got out of the Chevy. Nicky took his favorite treat from my fingers with the delicate precision of a high wire artist and settled down to enjoy it, ignoring me completely. Just like the cats, I thought, as I went through the back door, the mud room and into the kitchen. Cupboard love, pure and simple.

Another demonstration of cupboard love greeted me there. Ben sat at the table, eating a chicken sandwich and studying his planting schedule, while six cats sat in various poses around the table, watching intently and waiting for him to drop a piece of chicken or else take pity on their poor, starving little faces and feed them the rest of his lunch.

I dropped a kiss on top of Ben's head and noted that his hair was thinning. He was lucky that his hair was sand-colored, which meant the gray didn't show nearly as much as it did in the long black braid of hair that had come to me courtesy of my Italian grandmother's DNA. The black was rapidly losing ground.

He looked up at me, then at the feline audience. "You know what they remind me of? A poem by Matthew Arnold." He waved his arm at the cats and recited the words.

*Cruel, but composed and bland,  
Dumb, inscrutable and grand,  
So Tiberius might have sat,  
Had Tiberius been a cat.*

"Very apt," I said. Almost anything would trigger Ben's extensive knowledge and enthusiasm for ancient Rome. "Give Duff a call, will you? He wants more greens for the weekend shoppers."

"Okay." He rose, took a knife from the counter, and cut what was left of his chicken into six equal pieces, then gave one to each of the cats. It was no wonder his mother and I called him St. Francis of Assisi. Sometimes he spoiled the cats so much I worried about their digestion, but I was grateful for his care, considering that until we'd acquired our senior cat, George the Magnificent, Ben was positive he didn't like cats.

"Have you seen Maggie this morning?" I asked. Ben's mother lived on the other side of his big vegetable garden in a small cottage, along with four cats and a sausage dog who was learning from Nicky the finer points of herding deer.

"Not so far." He went into the mud room and started putting on his boots. "Why?"

"I just wondered if she's doing anything this afternoon. I want to go over to Norma's place to dig up some plants and throw some squatters out."

He straightened and picked up his gloves. "Oh, take Maggie if you can. She'll be much better with the plants." Then he did a double take. "What squatters?"

I relayed Duff's news and Ben shook his head. "Maybe you should wait until I can go with you. You don't know what you might run into." He glanced at the planting schedule in his hand. "But I don't have time today."

"It's all right," I said, "Maggie will be moral support and you never know, she might be good in a fight."

Ben scowled at me. "Don't be silly. My mother is eighty-two."

He still seemed convinced, because of her age, that she'd break in two if anybody so much as looked at her, though he'd improved a little bit over the past three years. As far as I was concerned, a woman of eight-two who not only has a boyfriend but rides around on his motorbike with him is tough enough to handle anything.

Ben sauntered off to the greenhouse, escorted by Nicky. I changed my clothes and walked over to Maggie's house. I had just raised my hand to knock when the door opened.

"I saw you coming, dear," Maggie said.

I followed her in, admiring her brisk walk and straight back. Five foot two and eyes of blue; that was how I thought of our Maggie though, in fact, she measured only four foot eleven. The feathered auburn hair took at least ten years off her age.

"Where are the babies?" I asked.

"Doran, Smoke, and Blue Eyes are out in the cat pen, soaking up the sunshine. Shaz is asleep on my bed, where she can soak up the sunshine in pure luxury. BJ went over to the greenhouse to help Nicky look after Ben." Maggie paused in the living room. "Do you want to visit the kitties?"

"No, I came to ask if you'd like to go over to Norma's place with me. That is, if you're not doing anything this afternoon." I wondered if we should take BJ with us, but scrapped the idea at once. Maggie might be good in a fight, but a roly-poly red dachshund who loved everybody would just get in the way. Nicky would be even worse.

Maggie glanced over at the kitchen clock. "Cal's coming for supper, but I have a couple of hours to spare. What do you want to do at Norma's? I thought the place was being renovated."

I explained about the squatters.

"Oh, that sounds like fun," she said. "Wait, I'll go put on my grubbies, too. Should I carry a pitchfork, do you think?"

"We don't want to get physical, Maggie. They might sue us."

Ten minutes later we got in the car, headed back over the hills, skirted Mora Bay and headed south along the west side of the island. The old farmhouse was set on the far side of Gordon Bay,

between the high tide mark and a thick forest of old-growth cedar, arbutus, and Douglas-fir. The garden was an overgrown shambles, but the house was looking better all the time.

We got out and stared at it. The wide veranda looked bare without Norma's porch swing, but that had gone to the dump with everything else. I hoped Betty Good had found another one.

"Which shall we tackle first?" Maggie asked. "California poppies or squatters?"

I took a deep breath. "We'd better do the squatters first. Get it over with."

She gave me a shrewd glance. "Don't be nervous, Holly. Remember, I spent a lot of years as a schoolmarm."

That actually did make me feel better. There's nothing as intimidating as an old-fashioned schoolteacher with a ruler in her hand and a steely glint in her eye. For somebody of my generation, anyway.

We walked up the steps and I knocked on the front door.

"Why are you knocking?" Maggie asked. "You're entitled to go inside."

"I suppose I am. But I don't like to just barge in, not if somebody is living here."

The door opened suddenly, making me jump. Standing in the doorway was a very thin girl with long, wavy, light brown hair that surrounded her head like a cloud. She was not at all what I'd expected. Her eyes were gray blue, her gaze direct. By the time I found my tongue, I'd reassessed my impression. This was a woman in her twenties, not a girl, though she looked like a waif from a modern fairy story, tattered jeans and all.

"I'm Holly Sutton," I said. I held out my hand. She didn't take it. "I'm one of the trustees for Adriana Island."

"You've come to kick us out, like that man tried to do, right?" The tone was combative, and I noticed she had a tight grip on the doorknob.

Might as well be honest. "Yes, I have. The other trustee tells me you feel that this property belongs to the public and that you have a right to use it." I sucked in another long breath. "But in fact, the property belongs to the residents of Adriana, and they want to use it as a museum and tourist office."

"That's too bad," she said. "We got here first."

A male voice spoke from the living room, off to the right of the hallway where the woman stood. "Jody, do you need help?"

She turned her head. "Yes."

The man was blue-eyed, with blond hair that reached his shoulders. He was taller than Jody but about the same age, and almost as slim. He stood beside the woman so that they presented a solid front. "Can't you just leave us alone?" he said. "We've already said we won't move. We're not going to damage anything."

I didn't know what to say but Maggie broke the impasse. "Can we come in and talk about it?" she asked. "I don't see how you can be comfortable here with no furniture and no stove or fridge."

"Yes," I said, "and you're five or ten miles from a grocery store, depending on which direction you go." There was no vehicle parked outside except my own.

Some sort of silent communication seemed to pass between the two of them for a moment. Then he said, "All right, you can come in. I guess you're entitled to make sure we're not wrecking the place." He held the door open for us and we walked into the living room, Jody leading the way. There was something oddly hesitant about the way she walked, as if she didn't want to go where she was headed.

I hadn't realized what it would be like squatting in an empty house. Under the window

facing north over Gordon Bay was a very small folding table and a folding camp stool. On the floor in the far corner lay a foam mattress with a couple of sleeping bags on it. In another corner were two back packs and a plastic bag from Duff's grocery store. And not one single thing else.

Maggie gasped. I swiveled to see what was wrong and she pointed dramatically at the folding table. "Look!" she said. "That's incredible."

I really looked at the table then and involuntarily stepped forward. "It's gorgeous!" On the table was a painting of a red bell pepper sitting on the veranda railing, with the vegetable garden, soft green and slightly out of focus, in the background. The colors were jewel-like, brilliant, and full of light. I felt I could pick up the pepper and take a bite out of it, imagined I could touch the greenery in the garden and feel the texture of the leaves.

"This is your work?" I asked the young man.

Diffidently, he said, "Yeah. That's what I do."

"It's beautiful," I said, and walked over to the table. His signature was in the corner. Jason Winter. I'd never heard of him. "Is that watercolor? Or oil?"

Jason shook his head. "Neither one. It's colored pencil." Jody had come to stand beside him, and he had an arm around her shoulders.

"But it looks like a painting," I said. "I've never seen colored pencil drawings that were anything like that."

"Techniques have come a long way in the last few years," he said. "If you know what you're doing and have the right tools, colored pencil can mimic the effects of oil paint, pastel, watercolor and acrylic."

Then I noticed, under the folding table, open boxes full of colored pencils and a clutter of small tools and bottles. But I found it hard to take my eyes off the red pepper. "Did you do that from life?"

"For the first couple of days," he said, "then we ate it."

Maggie laughed. Her eyes were sparkling with delight, and it would be no surprise if her next trip to Mora Bay was for the purchase of paper and colored pencils. She always loved trying something new.

"If all your work is this good," I said, "why are you living in an empty house?"

Jody spoke, her tone sharp. "You're asking a lot of nosy question. It's none of your business what we do."

Jason looked down at her and his face softened. "It's okay, Jody. I think they're just interested." He looked at Maggie and me. "We've been living on the street for a couple of years. It's hard to get a decent price for art when you're trying to sell it there."

"What about galleries?" Maggie asked.

"We found out that after they charge for framing and take their commission, we wouldn't do much better. There's a lot of competition for gallery space, too."

I knew, from long experience, that the same kind of competition existed for writers trying to sell short stories. No wonder this couple wasn't making enough to live comfortably. I retreated to the doorway. "I'll have to give this situation some thought."

Jody's head swiveled toward me as though she hadn't seen me move. Suddenly I knew why.

"You're blind!" I exclaimed.

"You got it. And I don't accept pity."

I was getting a little irritated with her defensive attitude. "What makes you think I was going to give you any?"

Jason held her closer to his side. "A lot of people do."

"You handle it remarkably well, Jody," Maggie said, joining me at the doorway. "The blindness, I mean."

"I'm sorry we had to intrude," I said. "But I will need to come back and talk to you again."

Jason nodded, still unsmiling, and Maggie and I went down the veranda steps and retrieved a trowel and a seedling flat from the trunk of the car. The door of the house closed very firmly behind us.

While Maggie knelt and dug up poppy and viola roots and I tucked them into the plastic flat, we asked each other all the questions I'd been dying to ask Jason and Jody. What had caused her blindness? Where were they from? Why had they been living on the street? And, finally, what was to be done about them?

"Do you have any ideas, Holly?" Maggie rose to her feet and brushed the soil off the knees of her jeans.

"I do, but I need to talk to Ben first." I headed back toward the car, enjoying the sweet smell of spring air and the sight of small green plants pushing shoots up through the soil. Maggie followed.

She glanced at me, obviously waiting for more. Finally, she said, "I suppose you're going to keep this brilliant idea to yourself."

"I need to think it through and see if there are any gaping holes in it before I even tell Ben."

She snorted. I admired how well she had learned to 'huff' just like Doran, the gray and white bad-boy leader of the cats she'd inherited from Norma. He always 'huffed' when things weren't going the way he wanted. "I'll think about it, too, Holly."

"How can you?" I put the plants and trowel into the trunk.

"Because I'm sure I know what your idea is."

"Bet you don't."

"Bet I do," she said. "In fact, I'll bet you a loonie."

"You're on." Ben's mother and I had become close friends, but there was no way she could read my mind. Her bet made me smile because back when Ben's father was alive, they had scorned gambling as something intrinsically evil. Widowhood had set the inner Maggie free in many ways.

She stood back for a moment, inspecting my old white Chevy sedan. "There's a lot of rust on this car."

"Yes, and it's getting worse. The engine is making funny noises, too. But I'm not surprised. We've been here five years and I think I bought this car ten years before that."

"Never mind," she said. "When the rust eats through that back panel and it falls off, you'll have the perfect island car."

When we got back to Holly Haven, Nicky bounced all around us, grinning his Samoyed grin. "You've already had your treat for the day, doggo."

"Holly, how can you be so cruel to that poor, adorable, little boy?"

"Have you forgotten that this poor, adorable, little boy chewed up your leather slippers when you first came here?"

"I forgave him for that long ago." Maggie turned to follow the gravel driveway to her cottage. "I must go. Get Ben to plant those roots."

"All right. Say hi to Cal. I haven't seen him in a week or so." Cal was her boyfriend, and his house was, most conveniently, just on the other side of our north fence.

About five, Ben came in from the greenhouse, pulled off his boots and went to the fridge to get a beer. "Smells good in here. Did you get rid of the squatters?"

"No, not yet. They're being very stubborn."

"Maybe you should sic the Mountie on them." He opened the beer and headed for the living room.

I followed him, clutching my usual pre-dinner scotch. "It's a possibility." My chair was already occupied by a pile of warm fur, so I put the drink down, removed the fur, which turned out to be two of the youngest Siamese and put them on my lap. Poppy and Caesar complained about being separated from their favorite chair by the width of my thighs but were almost settled down again when Poppy realized Ben was also sitting down. She deserted my lap and climbed up on his, there to stick her head firmly into his armpit.

It was Ben's turn to complain. "Poppy, you're jiggling my arm. If you make me spill beer, you'll have to lick it up."

Fat chance. All she wanted was the smell of Ben's deodorant mixed with his sweat. Caesar decided he didn't want to sleep on my lap without somebody to keep him warm and he deserted me, too.

George the Magnificent, our tabby-Siamese cross, the cat who had ruled all of Holly Haven and every creature on it for the five years we'd lived here, sat on top of the piano. Beside him lounged young Cato, George's shadow and disciple in all things political since he'd been birthed two years ago.

On the couch, across from me, were Kaylie and Ming, both purebred Siamese Applehead seal points and the parents of the three young ones. If George was king of Holly Haven, Kaylie was queen. All eight pounds of her seemed composed of raging ambition, and she was aiming for George's crown as soon as she could wrest it away from him. Ming, twenty pounds of laid-back caretaker with no ambition at all, raised his head, blinked his blue eyes at me and yawned.

"You're a lovely boy," I said. He came over and thumped down in my lap to purr at me and I caressed his silken head, remembering when he lost all the hair on it because he'd had a nervous breakdown trying to keep his five kittens together in one bunch. Most humans know it's impossible to herd cats. Ming didn't learn it until he was a father.

"So, what do you think about the squatters, Holly?"

"I don't know."

Ben stared at me. "That's not like you. You're usually good at solving problems."

"Another scotch might help, but I can't go. I have a cat in my lap."

"You'll have to go. I have a cat in my armpit."

Another impasse. "It's time we trained Nicky to get drinks for us."

Ben shook his head at me. "If you can suggest something as idiotic as that, you've had too much scotch already."

"I can dream, can't I?" Ming stood up, stretched, and went back to Kaylie. "It's okay, I can move now." I knew that by the time I returned with a second drink, Ben would have turned on the TV for the six o'clock news. Which meant I could think about the problem of the squatters without any interruption. Perhaps I could also puzzle out why Jason's cache of drawing tools contained a metal tea strainer. Or had it got there by accident?



## Chapter II -- Conversion

In the morning, I waited until Ben had downed his first cup of coffee and read the headlines on the front page before I tackled him. "I've thought of a solution for the squatter problem."

"Good." He didn't look up from the newspaper.

"I want to invite them to live here for the summer."

"What?" He stared at me, looking pole axed. "Did you say have them live *here*?"

"That's what I said."

Ben shook his head. His look clearly said that if I was any more stupid, he'd have to water me twice a week. "You can't possibly mean that. You know nothing about these people."

"Oh, but I do." I described Jody and Jason, emphasizing her blindness and his artistic talent. "They've been living on the street for a couple of years and that's just not right. His talent is worth supporting."

My husband was still shaking his head as if convinced there was something wrong with his hearing. "They'll rob us blind."

"Since she's blind, naturally she'll know how to do that."

Ben huffed. He'd obviously been taking lessons from Doran. "You don't have to be sarcastic."

"And you don't have to be so pessimistic. Anyway, what do we have that's worth stealing beside the cats and the seedlings in the greenhouse?"

"Peace of mind." Ben pushed his chair back with rather more force than was necessary and went to the fridge. He took out the yogurt container and spooned some into two cereal dishes, then reached for the bananas. By the time he was halfway through slicing the first banana, Ming and Kaylie were at his feet, yelling for their share. "All right, you two, your breakfast is coming."

It wasn't their breakfast, of course. The cat crew had long ago trained me to get up at six-thirty every morning and feed their little faces. Yogurt and banana seemed strange fare for cats, even Siamese cats, but Ming and Kaylie insisted on having some whenever Ben and I did. Possibly because they regarded themselves as in some sense human and therefore entitled to share in everything we ate. A superior breed of human, of course. There was no doubt that most of the time they thought both Ben and I needed watering twice a week.

Ben put yogurt and banana in small dishes for the felines and brought ours to the table. "Besides, where would you put them?"

"We do have three empty bedrooms and a bath upstairs."

"Yes, Holly, but I have a son who likes to come and stay with us, and you have a sister that does likewise."

"They never come at the same time." Ben's son, Gareth, and his wife, Sue, lived in Campbell River and spent the odd weekend with us. My sister, Ginna, and her husband, Tom, lived in Vancouver, and also spent the odd weekend with us. "So we only need to keep one bedroom free."

"You mean you'd give the squatters two bedrooms?"

I fetched the coffee pot and refilled our mugs. "Yes. One to be a bedroom and the other to be Jason's studio."

Ben put his spoon down and stared at me. "You have this all figured out, don't you?"

"Guilty as charged. I wanted to give it plenty of thought before I told you. And my idea solves two problems. One: getting those two out of Norma's house so it can be painted, and two:



supporting Jason's talent."

He put his bowl and spoon on the counter and went into the mud room. As he tucked the bottom of his jeans into his work boots, he said, "Well, forget it. I've heard some crazy ideas in my time, but that caps them all."

I opened my mouth to argue, but he was out the back door and heading for the greenhouse before I could say a word. Well, it didn't matter. I had breakfast dishes to wash and minutes from the trustees' meeting to type and email to Duff and Joanna. I'd have another go at Ben when he came in for coffee.

Duff phoned five minutes later. "Did you get rid of the squatters, Holly? One of the Carlson boys phoned me last night. They are really anxious to get on with painting. They've got a big job coming up and once they start that, they'll be busy for a couple of months."

"No, not yet. But I have an idea." I sat down and hoisted George the Magnificent into my lap so he could bat at the telephone cord without yanking the phone out of my hand. "I'm trying to convince Ben to let them move in with us for the summer."

There was a stunned silence at the other end of the line. "Holly! That's sheer madness. You have no idea what they might do to you or your property!"

"They haven't done any damage to Norma's house. And, well, I like them."

The silence was so heavy, I knew Duff was scowling. "But you don't know anything about them. There might be all kinds of ugly things in their background."

"I guess I'll find out, won't I?"

"Hasn't Ben said no?"

"Certainly he said no, Duff. But my campaign has just started. Ben always sounds tough, but he's a pushover for a sad story."

"Or any creature that meows at him." Duff sighed. "Well, I'll leave it up to you, but I think you're crazy."

We said goodbye and hung up. I stroked George while he purred and blinked those bright, intelligent green eyes at me. Maybe Duff and Ben were right. Maybe I was crazy.

George stood up and nuzzled my chin and I felt much better. At least he didn't think I was crazy. But I needed more than feline support for my plan. His Magnificence cooperated by jumping down and heading out the cat door. I put on a jacket and headed toward Maggie's, slowing down when I realized the sun was bright and sparkling on the Strait and the air almost warm enough for summer. It was heaven to smell the scent of freshly turned earth and green plants growing all around me. In the trees, birds trilled territorial challenges between forays for worms.

Sitting at Maggie's kitchen table, with coffee and a cookie in front of me, I said, "Have you figured out yet what my so-called brilliant idea was yesterday?"

She smiled. "Inviting Jason and Jody to live with you."

I pulled a loonie out of my jeans pocket and handed it over. "Okay, so you *can* read my mind. Now tell me how to convince Ben to agree. He's absolutely dead against it."

"Men don't like change, dear. Having new people in the house will upset his routine. You'll have to arrange it so that he decides for himself that it's a good idea."

I mused on that for a minute. "I know he won't listen to anything more from me. Maybe I'll take him to Norma's house so he can meet them."

The cat door leading from the cat pen on the west side of the house banged a few times and Maggie's four cats marched into the kitchen. "They look as if they have serious business to accomplish," I said.

"They do." Maggie rose and took a small bag out of the cupboard. "It's time for their midmorning treat." When she sat down, Doran stood up and put his paws on her knee. He was a chunky boy with gray and white fur, medium long, and a white blaze on his forehead to match his white feet, chest, and belly. On the left cheek, his whiskers curved upward, on the right, they curved downward, a feature that seemed to go well with his impish expression. Maggie gave him a cat candy and, instead of going away with it, he leapt to her lap and then to the table, where he took a close look at the cookies, huffed in disdain, and sat down to see what the humans might do next.

"That bad boy always insists on being where the action is," Maggie said, "looking at it, climbing on it, sniffing it, making comments."

She leaned down to give candies to Smoke and Blue Eyes, both easy-going and affectionate. Smoke was twenty pounds of solid cat with soft smoke-gray fur, yellow eyes and a quiet little meow that didn't come close to matching his size. Blue Eyes was a ginger tabby with, of course, blue eyes, and long slim legs that hinted at a Siamese gene or two in her background.

Shaz, who always waited until the rabble had eaten, strolled to Maggie's side, looking every inch a princess, and sat down with her plume of a tail wrapped daintily around her front paws.

"Miss Blonde Bombshell of 2006, with an IQ of forty-three and an attention span of perhaps sixty seconds," Maggie said, giving her a candy. Shaz ate her treat and minced over to me, blinking her blue eyes and no doubt hoping I would give her candies, too.

"I know it seems like she's not playing with a full deck," I said, reaching down to scratch behind her black ears, "but I can forget that because she is utterly gorgeous." Shaz was a Ragdoll, with soft, thick, silky fur and blue eyes. Her coloring was a mixture of black, white and seal, resembling in configuration that of a Siamese. Ming had rescued her as an abandoned kitten, and she'd spent her first few months living under my couch. She wouldn't sit on any lap but Maggie's, however, so when Maggie moved into the cottage, Shaz went with her.

My mother-in-law chuckled. "Oh, she's actually very smart. After all, she has me trained to provide food, belly rubs on demand and a king-size bed with a soft coverlet. She got quite indignant last night when Cal stayed and took her half of the bed. The only way I could get her to stop yelling was to take her favorite cardboard box out of the closet, so she could sleep in her own private bed."

"Doesn't she sleep in the laundry basket when your bed is full?"

"Only when there are enough clothes to make a soft bed, dear. She always insists on the best of everything."

"She *is* a princess, you know," I said. "It's a good thing she never wanted to be anything more than a princess when she lived with me. George had enough of a problem with Kaylie trying to boot him off the throne."

"More coffee, Holly?"

I rose. "No, thanks. I've got a few things I need to do before lunch, not the least of which is to figure out how to get Ben to agree to what I want."

Maggie's eyes twinkled. "Lots of luck, Holly!"

That remark did not fill me with confidence. Maggie knew how stubborn Ben could be. After all, he'd inherited the trait from her.



I made Ben's favorite, grilled ham and cheese sandwiches, for lunch. While we ate, the six

cats and Nicky sat around his, watching hopefully.

"You should have made a sandwich for them, too," Ben said. "Oh, did you collect the eggs this morning?"

"I had to bribe Mr. Mighty with a snack, but yes, I got the eggs." Our White Leghorn rooster ruled the henhouse and the hens. All of us, even George, had learned to stay out of the way of his beak and claws. While I cleared the plates away and poured coffee, the cats gave up their quest for goodies and wandered off in all directions. Nicky heaved a big sigh and lay down. "Ben, do you have time to go to Brentwood Park with me this afternoon?"

He eyed me suspiciously. "Not if you're going to ask them to move in here."

I did my best to look indignant. "Of course not. You made it very clear that you don't want to do that. I think they might back down if two of us are there to threaten them with being thrown off the property."

"I still say you'd be better off getting Russ to do it."

"I'd like to give it one more try the polite way," I said. "If it doesn't work, then I'll call Russ. And, if it does work, we can drive them into Mora Bay so they can catch a ferry back to wherever they came from."

Ben produced a dramatic sigh, an accomplishment he'd probably learned from Nicky. "I guess I can spare the time."

When I slid behind the wheel of my car, Ben said, "Why are we taking the Chevy? If we took Bouncing Blue Betsy, we could stop at Mora Bay on the way back. I need more steer manure for the garden."

"In case we have to drive the kids to the ferry." I didn't remind him that I hated riding in Bouncing Blue Betsy. She'd been given that name for good reason. I felt sure that pickup had no springs left, but Ben was rather sensitive about his all-time favorite vehicle.

"Oh, all right," he grumbled. "I suppose getting them off the island as well as off the property is a good idea."

"Tomorrow is Friday. If you're taking lettuce and green onions into the grocery store, you can get steer manure then."

He brightened. "And I'll grab a sandwich with Duff at the Yellow Duck."

When we arrived at Norma's house, it looked deserted. "Maybe they've gone," Ben said. Nobody answered our knocking and Ben began to look almost cheerful. His hopes were dashed when I opened the door and, after getting no answer to my shout, stepped in far enough to see that the living room was still furnished with sleeping bags, backpacks and the folding table where Jason did his drawing.

"Maybe they went for a walk," I suggested.

"I don't have time to hang around here all day," Ben said firmly. Before he could get back into the car, however, Jason and Jody came around the corner of the house. Jason had camera gear in one hand and Jody's hand in the other.

"I see you've brought reinforcements," Jason's tone was even.

"Yes, on the off chance it might take two of us to convince you to leave," I said. I looked at Ben, motioning him to say something. But he was silent, staring at Jody with the same expression on his face that appeared there when he saw a hurt or hungry animal. I had to admit she looked more than ever like a starving refugee. I hoped she wouldn't open her mouth and ruin Ben's image of her as someone who needed rescuing.

"This is my husband, Ben," I said. "I've told him about your drawings, Jason. May we see what you're working on?"

"Before you get down to business, you mean?" A hint of wry humor kept the words from being as bitter as perhaps he felt. "Come in and look, then." He led the way up the steps and across the veranda.

"I see you were taking photographs," I said, making the sentence almost a question.

Jody moved ahead of him to open the door and we followed them in. Jason said, "I use photographs to work from when I draw. Light and shadow change so quickly that it's difficult to draw from life unless you use artificial lights." He left us standing in the living room and went across the hall into the kitchen.

Jody burst out, "I hate this! You're going to kick us out and we have nowhere to go." She stood there with her chin thrust out and her fists clenched.

Good girl, I thought, relieved. That's better than a pathetic meow.

Ben looked stricken.

Before I could speak, Jason came back and carefully laid a sheet of drawing paper on the small folding table. "This is the one I'm working on right now."

I noticed the metal tea strainer was still in Jason's box of tools under the table. So maybe he hadn't accidentally put it there. When I got the chance, I'd ask him what he used it for. And what was in all those little bottles.

Ben stepped forward to look and I heard him gasp, just as Maggie had gasped when she saw the drawing of the pepper. When I pushed past him to look, I saw why.

Ben glanced at Jason with awe in his expression. "That's my tomato."

"I beg your pardon?" Jason said.

"Did you get that tomato at the Mora Bay grocery store?" Ben asked.

"Yes, I did," Jason said. "What of it?"

Ben said firmly, "It's my tomato. I mean, it came out of my greenhouse. It's an heirloom tomato called a Brandywine."

"I thought it was just an ordinary beefsteak tomato," Jason said. "What's an heirloom tomato?"

Ben was always happy when he could talk about the plants he coddled in his greenhouse. "It's grown from tomato seed which has been passed down for many years, usually by family and friends. These seeds are kept alive and cultivated because they offer better flavor and higher yield."

"It did have a really great flavor," Jody said, "way better than those tomatoes picked green and shipped up from the south during the winter. They're kind of like cardboard with seeds."

Ben beamed. "I love the Brandywine. I only grow a few as a hobby, though. I supply a variety of vegetables to the island, and I'd have to build another greenhouse if I were going to grow these tomatoes commercially."

"So, we lucked in when we got one," Jason said. "I was going to title the drawing just 'tomato' but 'Brandywine tomato' would be better. Wait a minute." He looked at Ben. "Did you say your name was Ben? Then I'll call it 'Ben's Brandywine.'"

"Thank you," Ben said. I could tell he was enormously pleased.

"If you really want to say thank you," Jody said, quietly for her, "you would go away and leave us alone. We only want to stay until September."

"We can't do that," I said. "We need to get this house finished so the tourist office and museum can be open for the long weekend in May. Isn't that right, Ben?"

He looked uncomfortable. "Uh, yes."

I went on. "If you won't leave because we ask you to do so, I'll have no option but to call the

RCMP and have them arrest you for trespassing."

Jody burst out again. "That's really dirty!"

"Well, there is another option." Ben didn't look at me as he said that, but his neck was red with embarrassment.

"What?" Jason's tone was disbelieving.

Ben took a deep breath. "We have a small farm, a market garden operation, on the other side of the island. We also have a big house. We'd be willing to have you live with us for the next five months." He added, "So you can do your artwork."

Jody stepped forward and tucked her arm through Jason's. He looked from Ben to me and back again, his face a study in amazement. "Are you guys nuts?"

"You, too?" I shook my head. "Nobody I know seems to think I'm playing with a full deck."

Jason turned his blue eyes on me. "You're going along with this?"

"My husband and I discussed it this morning."

Jason put his arm around Jody. "What do you think, Jody?"

"We don't have a lot of choice," she said.

"You do have one more choice," I said. "Move somewhere else."

"No," Jody said, determination in her tone. "Jason wanted to come to this island to do art because he'd heard so much about it from a friend of ours."

"Yeah," he said, "we decided to give it, like you said, five months or so. Till our money runs out. We've got enough for food for that long. Maybe."

"You can pay me for your food," Ben said. "It won't be as expensive as eating out or buying at the grocery store. We grow a lot of what we eat."

I'd been wondering when Ben's cost accountant persona would show up. "And if you want to earn a few bucks, I'm sure Ben will find work for you. Or maybe his mother will. She lives in her own house on our property."

"Was that the lady who came with you yesterday?" Jason said. "She was cool."

"That's our Maggie. Always up for adventure."

The two young people were silent for a moment. I got the feeling again that they were communing in silence somehow.

Finally, Jason said. "I don't know about this. We'd need to see what it's like at your place."

"That's not a problem," Ben said. Now that he'd committed himself, he seemed eager to get on with it. "We can take you there right now and give you a tour."

Another silence from Jason and Jody. Then she said, "Let's do it. What can we lose?"

"Okay," he said. "Let me stash my camera, then we're good to go." He went back into the hall, and I could hear him climbing the stairs to the second story.

Jody seemed to sense the question in my mind. "He has a hiding place for it in case somebody comes in looking for stuff to steal. We couldn't afford to replace a camera."

Ten minutes later Jason and Jody were tucked into the back seat of the Chevy, fighting for leg room among the bags of dog treats, cloth shopping bags, and a box of secondhand books that I'd been meaning to drop off at Goodwill for weeks. Once on our way, Ben began to point out landmarks and spin a little island history. I noticed he sometimes hesitated before speaking and his sentences didn't quite sound right, but I didn't realize what he was doing until Jody spoke.

"Ben, talk like a normal human being! I know what the word 'see' means. I use it all the time." She took a breath. "I may be blind, but I can look forward to something and see you next week, too."

I was too busy driving to look at Ben's face, but I was sure it must be red. He said he was

sorry, reverted to his usual way of talking and the rest of the trip went smoothly. When we crossed the cattle guard, there was Nicky bouncing up and down as usual, waiting for his treat.

"Is that a Samoyed?" Jason asked, with a definite note of interest.

"That's Nicky," Ben said, "and yes, he is pure Samoyed. Which means that he chews things, wanders and is generally a pain in the butt." Ben's words were derogatory, but his tone of voice said he adored the dog.

I looked back to reach for the dog biscuits and caught a glimpse of Jody's face as Jason helped her out of the back seat. It was full of joy. By the time I'd managed to climb out, keys and dog cookie in hand, she was down on her knees with her arms around Nicky's neck. He looked a bit startled and was trying to stretch his head around to sniff her, but he apparently thought she was quite acceptable. He broke loose to come and retrieve his biscuit, then went back to his new fan.

"I never thought to ask," I said. "Do you have a Seeing Eye dog?"

"I used to have one," Jody said, "but he died a few years ago."

Jason smiled. "I'm her Seeing Eye dog now."

As if on cue, she said, "What's the place look like, Jason?"

"Right in front of us," he said, "is a two-story house with cedar siding, painted green. Off to the left are a carport, a workshop, and a chicken house. Oh yes, and an orchard. Off to the right is a huge garden with a high fence around it and past that is a big greenhouse. Further over is a small house."

"The fence is to keep out the deer," Ben said.

"The house belongs to Ben's mother," I said.

"No beach?" Jody asked.

"I don't know," Jason said. "I can see the ocean, though. Beyond the house is a meadow that slopes down the hill to a bunch of cedars, maples, and Garry oaks and beyond that is the sea, with a few little rocky islands."

"You're a whole lot better at description than a Seeing-Eye dog," I said. "We aren't on the waterfront, but there's a path down through those trees. You have to climb through a fence and cross a road allowance and a very small, empty waterfront lot to get to the beach. It's not sand, either; just pebbles."

"There are some places where it's smooth granite," Ben said. "Do you want to take a walk down there?"

"Yes," Jason and Jody said simultaneously.

We started off, with Ben in the lead, Jody with her arm through Jason's, and I brought up the rear. Nicky cavorted all around us, tail wagging, excited to be going on an adventure. We only walked forty feet before Jason had a question. "Is that a rose garden next to the big, fenced garden?"

"It is now," I said. "It used to be a swimming pool. Then a deer fell into it and Ben filled it with rocks, cemented it over to use as an outdoor patio, and planted rose bushes all around the edge."

"That little concrete sculpture looks like a cat," Jason said. "Or am I mistaken?"

"No, it is a cat," Ben said. "The first stray we adopted, Henry, is buried under one of the rose bushes."

"Cat?" Jody said, apprehension in her voice. "Do you have a cat? Because I don't know whether I can live in a house with a cat. Does it bite?"

Ben immediately launched into a description of cats that portrayed them as the most

wonderful animals in existence and, by the time he stopped long enough for anyone else to speak, we were at the barbed wire fence at the foot of our property. We climbed through and walked down to the beach. It was a perfect, windless April day and the tiny waves lapping at the beach sounded as if they were singing a little melody. No houses had been built here yet, and the waves had no competition from lawnmowers or boats, just the odd comment from seagulls flying or floating by.

"This is great," Jason said. "Do you come here often?"

"No," I said. "We intend to, but we always seem to be too busy."

Jason shook his head in a sorrowful way. "That's too bad. You need to live in the moment, enjoy the treasures you've got, instead of always doing stuff."

"*Carpe diem*," Ben said solemnly.

Jason raised his eyebrows.

"An ancient Roman wrote that," Ben said. "Horace, born 65 BC, died 8 BC."

"If you decide to stay with us," I said, "you'll get used to it. Ben's hobby is studying ancient Rome."

"Let's go look at the house," Jody said. "I still don't know about a cat."

"They're not like dogs," I said. "Dogs look on humans as pack leaders. Cats don't run in packs and they're quite sure they're superior to us in every way. As long as you're properly respectful they can be very good friends."

We walked back up toward the house in silence, enjoying the moments, as Jason had suggested. Halfway there, George came trotting down the path to meet us. I scooped him up in my arms and he butted my forehead with his.

I turned to Jody. "I'm holding George the Magnificent, the tabby-Siamese king of Holly Haven. If you'd like to pet him, this would be a good time. Let him sniff your hand first. Cats don't like humans taking liberties with them until they've made sure you don't smell funny."

She took a step closer, and I guided her hand to George's nose. After a couple of seconds, she giggled. "That tickles! Are those his whiskers?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"I haven't always been blind," Jody said. "I know what cats look like. I've just never met one before."

When I thought George had finished his inspection of this new hand, I guided it to his head. "Stroke his head gently, then down along his back."

"Oh," she said. "Oh. He's very soft. And warm. And is that a purr?"

"It is indeed." Mr. Magnificent was doing a good job on this stranger.

"And that means he likes me?"

"Let's say for the moment that he likes being petted," I said. "If he sits in your lap that will mean he likes you."

She turned toward Jason, who had been, along with Ben, watching the introduction of feline and human. "I think I could get along with this cat."

George struggled to get down and I let him go so that he and Nicky could have a game of tag on the way home. "I'm sure you'll get along with the other five, too."

"Five?" Her voice rose. "You have five *more* cats? Why?"

"They're addictive, like chocolate. You'll see. Actually, we had eight at one point, after Kaylie and Ming had kittens, but we gave three away."

In the house, we took Jason and Jody on a tour, first of the downstairs, then upstairs, while Jason gave her an outline of the layout. I'd hoped to do more cat introductions, but the others

were nowhere to be seen and probably out enjoying the spring sunshine. When we were done, I said, "I thought you could use the two bedrooms on the north side of this floor, one for your bedroom and the small one that faces east for a studio. The bathroom is between the two bedrooms. That will leave the third bedroom for when we have company staying over. Will that work for you?"

"Can we talk about it?" Jason asked.

"Sure," Ben said. "Holly and I will go make coffee. Come downstairs when you're ready."

In the kitchen, sunshine streamed in through the glass sliding doors that led to the cedar deck facing the garden and greenhouse. I prepped the coffeemaker, then made a move toward the cupboard to get cookies, when I saw that Ben had already put out a plateful, along with mugs, cream, and sugar. He felt, as I did, that the kitchen table, the place where we always sat to eat, drink coffee, make plans and gossip, was the heartbeat of the house.

Ben was looking at me, not saying anything, which was unusual for him. I opened my mouth to ask what made him change his mind so quickly about the squatters and he held his hand up for silence.

"Don't ask," he said. "When defeat is inevitable, it is wisest to yield. Quintilian, 35 AD to 100 AD."

Generously, I did not comment. He'd lost the battle about the squatters so the least I could do was to let him have the last word.





### Chapter III -- Introductions

Jody and Jason came into the kitchen just as the coffeemaker finished gurgling and spluttering, announcing that the coffee was ready. They sat down at Ben's invitation, and I poured coffee.

"So what do you think?" Ben asked, when everyone was settled with a mug of coffee and a peanut butter cookie.

"We like it," Jody said. She put her cookie down and pushed back a strand of her cloud of fine brown hair.

"We like it a lot," Jason said. "But we still don't understand why you're doing this."

"There's no secret agenda," Ben said. "Holly wants you out of the house you're in so it can be painted and ready for use in May. We're happy to give a hand to somebody with talent like yours and we have the room to do it."

"Okay," Jason conceded, "but we're not used to people like you being willing to help."

"You both must have families somewhere," I said, reaching for another cookie. "Surely they're willing to help."

"No, they're not."

Jason's tone was abrupt and told me he wouldn't welcome any more comments along that line. Where and who had they come from? I wished I knew.

"What about food?" Jody asked. "We're vegetarians."

"That's not a problem," I said, "as long as you eat eggs and cheese. I think the easiest way of dealing with food is for you to make your own breakfast and lunch whenever you want to eat those meals, from whatever you can find in the fridge and the cupboards. We always have eggs and bread on hand, jam and peanut or cashew butter, oatmeal, cheese and onions, everything you'd expect to find in a kitchen. If you want to make pancakes, there's flour. Lots of times I make soup for lunch and you're welcome to share in that."

"Sounds good to me," Jody said. "As for supper, could we take turns? You do it one night; we do it the next?"

"Hey, I like that idea. It will be nice to have a regular break from cooking." I thought about having another cookie, but peanut butter cookies have so many calories they tend to get into everything, mostly my hips.

"There won't be meat in what we make," Jason warned.

"We're used to that," Ben said. "My mother is vegetarian."

"You'll have to show me where everything is," Jody said. The defensive note was back in her voice.

"Sure, that's easy," I said. "I'd suggest that we go collect your things first so you can settle in upstairs. I'll cook tonight and you can explore the kitchen while I'm doing it." I rose. "Let's go back to the park so you can pack up."

"Where are those other five cats you talked about?" Jody asked.

"Oh, they'll turn up," I said. "They don't usually bother hanging around at coffee time because they don't like cookies. Nicky, of course, will eat almost anything, so he never misses out on a session around this table." Nicky, who always recognized his name, thumped his tail on the floor where he was sitting beside Ben.

Ben stood up. "I won't come. I need to work in the garden and get it ready to add fertilizer tomorrow."

Jody and Jason were quiet on the way back to Norma's house and I knew they were wondering if they'd made the right decision. I was a little nervous about my own decision. What would it be like to live with two strangers for five months? But I was sure they wouldn't be strangers long. I told them why we'd come to Adriana Island, and that we'd been here for five years, which led to why I'd become a trustee and a few other stories, so it seemed we were at the Brentwood house in no time.

They had everything packed into the car inside twenty minutes. I was still astonished at how little they owned. "You don't seem to need much painting gear."

Jason tucked his box of pencils and other tools into the trunk. "That's the great thing about colored pencil painting," he said. "It's affordable and easy to take traveling. Not like oil painting, where you have to wait a long time for things to dry. No brushes to clean, either."

"I'm really curious about that metal tea strainer, Jason," I said.

He laughed. "Well, it's not for making tea! I use it to create powder from colored pencils. I place the strainer over a small plastic cup and rub the pencil against the inside of the mesh. The mesh shaves the soft medium into a fine powder. I apply the powder to a painting with a cotton pad or Q-tip to create a delicate color." He pointed to the sky. "See that very thin, wispy cloud? I would use white powder to create that in a painting."

Jason helped Jody into the front seat, got in the back, and we were on our way again. "Should I stop at the grocery store?" I asked. "Is there any special food or drink that you like?"

"No," Jason said. "We're used to making do with whatever food is available. And we don't drink pop because it has either sugar or aspartame in it."

"Wise decision," I said. "Our water comes from a well and I think you'll like it."

"Oh!" He sounded pleased and surprised. "You mean that structure off to the left of the house isn't just a fancy wishing well?"

"You didn't mention that!" Jody exclaimed.

"I'll show you when we get back," he said. "There was so much else to see I forgot about it."

"Speaking of the well," I said, "if we get a long dry spell in the summer, we have to ration water, or the well will go dry. It's happened before." By the time I finished telling them about it going dry when we had, in addition to ourselves, four relatives, a carpenter, a plumber and something like seven cats and two dogs and were trying to finish the renovations to the house, we were back at Holly Haven.

I helped them carry their things upstairs. "Oh, look! You can meet two of the cats now. They've been sleeping on your bed." Ming and Kaylie had raised their heads and yawned, then done a double take at the new arrivals. "Jody, come and sit on the bed and I'll introduce you."

She sat down, looking a trifle apprehensive. Ming got up, stretched, and walked over to sniff her.

"Put your hand out slowly." I guided it to Ming's back.

She touched him, gingerly at first, then stroked his back and felt around his chest. "He's really big," she said, "much bigger than George."

"He's about twenty pounds, which is unusual for a purebred Siamese," I said. "He and Kaylie are both purebred Applehead Siamese seal points. Ming is a throwback and has the crossed eyes and kinks in his tail that have been bred out of most of them."

"Oh, I feel the kink!" Jody seemed excited. "What does seal point mean?"

"It means their points – ears, face, paws, and tail – are dark brown, like a seal, while the rest of their fur is a creamy white. Blue points have a blue-grey color on their points."

"Will he mind if I feel him all over?" Jody asked.

"If he does, he'll just walk away from you," I said, "but I suspect he'll like it." Ming was purring like a small motorboat. "He's a very laid-back cat. I'd say almost a Buddhist."

Jason reached down to stroke Ming. "That's what we are. Well, not officially, because we don't like being labeled, but that's how we try to live."

"Then you'll understand Ming very well. The rest of the cats, too, since they all tend to live in the moment. It's something I wish I could learn to practice more than I do."

"It's not easy," Jody said. "Oh, here's the other one." Kaylie had decided Ming was getting too much attention and had come and stuck her head under Jody's hand.

"That's Kaylie," I said. "She's much smaller but three times as determined. She wants George's position as senior cat, but so far, he's fended her off. She and Ming had five kittens almost two years ago and we still have three, Caesar, Poppy, which is short for Poppaea, and Cato."

Jason laughed. "Ancient Rome again. How come they're not sleeping up here?"

"They like being outside in good weather, chasing birds and squirrels and mice."

"Are Ming and Kaylie too old for that?" Jason asked.

"Not at all," I said. "Kaylie prefers her food handed to her on a golden plate by her human servants. Not to mention that she's lazy. And Ming, as a kitten, was attacked by a family of purple martins and he's been terrified of birds ever since. He does go outside, but he's careful not to get too far away from his escape hatch into the house."

"They all have different personalities." Jody's voice was full of wonder.

I rose. "Just like people. That's part of what makes them so much fun. I'll leave you to talk to the cats and get settled up here. Oh, and Jason, there's an old table in the workshop that you can use for a drawing table. If it's suitable, Ben can help you lug it upstairs." I headed for the door. "I'm going to dream up something for supper. Come into the living room about five and we'll have our usual pre-dinner drinks, and you can meet the other cats. They almost always turn up for happy hour."

Downstairs, I phoned Duff. "Okay, you can get the Carlson boys in now. The house is empty."

"Good work!" he said. "But don't tell me those two are actually going to live in your house."

"Well, if you don't want to hear it, I won't tell you," I said, "but yes, they're busy at the moment getting settled upstairs." In the ensuing silence, I could imagine Duff shaking his head.

"I still think you're crazy," he said finally.

"They're nice kids. And I'm sure it's going to be fine."

"And Ben went along with all this?" Duff's tone said he didn't believe it.

"He was the one that asked them," I said.

"Then he's nuts, too."

"He's going to Mora Bay tomorrow morning," I said, "with the vegetables you wanted. Go have lunch with him and hear the details firsthand."

I washed potatoes to bake in the oven and cut up broccoli for steaming. Both would go well with soy sausage. And I took the last of the blackberry pies from the previous autumn out of the freezer. It wasn't fancy fare, but probably better than they'd been surviving on lately. They must have parents somewhere, or Jason wouldn't have reacted so angrily to my mentioning them. What could those people be thinking, to let their kids live on the street?

Jody and Jason went on another short exploration trip outside, which included our picturesque well. It was four feet in diameter, protected from the elements by a thigh-high stone wall and a peaked wooden roof. A wooden lid kept debris out of the water, but the small oaken

bucket and crude winding handle suspended beneath the roof were purely for show since we had an efficient pump housed at the back of the woodshed. I'd gotten over feeling romantic about the well when it went dry the first time, but newcomers always thought it belonged in a fairy tale. When Jason and Jody came in, I introduced them to the kitchen appliances and cupboards and the linen closet.

At five, four humans, six cats, and one dog gathered in the living room. Jody and Jason sat on the couch, having first removed Ming and Kaylie. Kaylie laid her ears back and stalked off, indignant over losing her throne, but Ming stayed on the seat next to Jody and watched her.

"Ming is sitting beside you, Jody," I said. "If you put your left hand out, you'll find him."

She reached out, tentatively, and as soon as she felt his fur against her fingers, she began stroking him. He liked it, for he began to purr, but he kept looking up at her face. I wondered if he was trying to figure out why she didn't react or move quite like the other humans.

"Can I get you two something to drink?" Ben asked. He already had a beer sitting on the side table and I had my scotch.

"We don't drink," Jason said.

"That's right," Jody added. "If I do, I get blind drunk."

Dead silence reigned for two seconds and then I started to laugh, joined almost at once by Ben. Jody and Jason sat there grinning. It was obviously a line they'd used before. I was feeling better and better about these two. If she could make jokes about being blind, I doubted there was much wrong with her attitude.

Ben sat down and Poppy leapt into his lap and butted her head against his arm until she could stick her head right in his armpit.

"Look at that!" Jason exclaimed. "That cat has her head in Ben's armpit." He sounded almost shocked.

"She likes the smell of my deodorant," Ben said. He looked down at her. "Don't you, little princess?"

"She even digs his dirty shirts out of the laundry and chews on them," I said. "You'll notice that she's a throwback, like Ming, with kinks in her tail and crossed eyes."

"Her points are darker," Jason said. "Like dark chocolate. And she's tiny, compared to Ming."

"She has a voice like a trucker, though," Ben said. "She likes rough petting and yowls like I'm killing her, but she never tries to get away and, if I stop, she nags until I do it some more."

"Maybe she makes up for being small with a big voice," Jody said. She was still petting Ming. She gave a start as Caesar jumped onto her lap. "Who is this?" She began petting him with her right hand and he butted against it approvingly.

"That's Caesar," I said. "He has a kinky tail, blue eyes, and chocolate points, like Poppy, but he's a lot bigger and is quite sure that he owns any part of the world that isn't already owned by George. He likes to save food for later by burying it in one of Ben's boots. So, if you try to put on a shoe or a boot and can't because there's a bone in it, Caesar will have put it there."

"Where is George?" Jody asked.

"He's on top of the piano," Jason replied. "Looking regal."

"George the Magnificent is always regal," I said, "except when he's drunk on catnip. He uses the top of the piano as his throne."

"Oh, there's a pure white cat," Jason said, as Cato leapt up on the piano stool and thence to the top to sit beside George. "He's not a Siamese, is he?"

"He's half Siamese," I said. "He was in the same litter as Poppy and Caesar, but he's not

Ming's. We always kept Kaylie locked in the house when she was in heat, but she got out once and had a romantic tryst with a white cat that lives in the neighborhood. Cato has the long legs and blue eyes of a Siamese, though."

"If George is king," said Jason, "why does he let Cato sit beside him on the throne?"

"Cato is George's disciple," Ben said, smiling. "He follows George everywhere and I suspect is taking lessons from him on the fine points of kingship. You know, the original Cato in ancient Rome was a politician, orator, and archconservative."

"These cats really are characters," Jason said. "So is the dog." He turned to Jody. "Caesar is lying on top of Nicky and he doesn't seem to mind."

"The cats have Nicky well-trained, not to mention the rest of us," I said. I noticed that Kaylie hadn't gone far. She was curled up in the basket I kept for newspapers and magazines. If I put a red ribbon on the basket, she'd look like a Christmas present. I'd noticed that people now often used baskets and bags to hold presents rather than wrapping paper. Considering how quickly the cats could wreck wrapping paper and ribbons, I was in favor of this innovation.

We shared more stories about the cats until it was time for dinner, which went better than I had expected. Jody handled cutting her baked potato and putting butter on it, as well as cutting her sausage, nearly as well as a sighted person. I felt confident that she'd be able to manage working in the kitchen, though if she wanted to open a can of something, she'd have to have someone tell her what it contained.

After pigging out on warm blackberry pie, Ben said, "I'm going back out to the greenhouse. I can get another hour in before it gets dark."

"And I'm going upstairs. I want to do some work tonight," Jason said. "But before we go, I was wondering if you'd let me have that box of books in your car, Holly. The one you said you were giving to Goodwill. I read a lot."

"Of course," I said. I showed him where the car keys were hung in the mud room.

"A room without books is like a body without a soul," Ben intoned. "Cicero, born 106 BC, died 43 BC."

Jason laughed. "Do you memorize those sayings?"

"A few," Ben said. "I learned that one today. I'm going to have lunch with our friend, Duff, tomorrow and I have to have something to compete with the weird facts he's always throwing at me."

Late that night, when Ben and I were ensconced in our king size bed, with Nicky and two or three cats at the foot, and George sharing my pillow, I said, "So what do you think about Jason and Jody?"

"I think it's going to work out just fine," he said, sticking the bookmark back in the book he was reading. "Just don't say 'I told you so.'"

"I wouldn't dream of it." But he probably knew I was thinking it.



Next morning I'd just finished drying the breakfast dishes and was looking out the window, when the kids came into the kitchen.

"What are you staring at?" Jason asked.

"The cedar shrub at the end of the driveway. That's the cats' message tree, where they get their p-mail. George is out there now, checking it."

"Getting their what?" Jody said.

"P-mail," I said. "Like e-mail. Cats spray in certain spots to tell other cats the territory belongs to them. And maybe they say other things. I don't know. But animals do pick up a lot of information from the scent of urine."

"Do strange cats come and spray that tree?" Jason asked.

"Oh, yes. That's why George is sniffing, to see who's left a calling card."

"That's amazing," Jody said. "I thought cats were just furry cushions with claws."

"Well, ours do spend part of their time as throw pillows, but that's only a hobby," I said.

"After you have breakfast, I'd like to take you over to Maggie's so you can meet her again and meet her brood. They're not allowed to roam, so they have an exercise pen attached to her house."

"I noticed that yesterday," Jason said. "I wondered what it was."

"When you say 'brood,'" Jody said, "do you mean more cats?"

I laughed. "I told you they're addictive. Maggie has four, and one dog, a dachshund."

Jason pulled a carton of eggs and a quart of milk out of the fridge. "I'm happy to do that. I want to take some photographs today, but I'd rather wait until the sun is more overhead. You okay with that, Jody?"

"Sure," she said. "Are you doing something with eggs? If so, I'll make toast."

"I'll leave you to it," I said. "I'm going to my den and check my own messages."

Half an hour later, when I heard Maggie's voice in the kitchen, I closed the laptop and went down the hall.

"I came over to invite you all for coffee," she said. "Where's Benjamin?"

"He went to Mora Bay with lettuce and green onions for the store," I said. "He has to pick up supplies and then go for a quick lunch with Duff, so he won't be back until around one or so."

"Too bad," Maggie said, "but Cal is coming, so we'll have almost a full table."

In the five years that I'd known him, Cal always managed to find a reason to show up around coffee time. I knew that he could, and did, make good coffee, so I thought cookies must be the attraction. He'd raved so much over my ginger snaps that I'd offered him the recipe, but he merely stared at me for a minute before he said, "Who, me? Make cookies? I don't have time." I suspected he just found it more convenient to have other people make cookies for him.

I explained to Jason and Jody. "Cal is Maggie's boyfriend and a neighbor. Aside from being the island's Mr. Fix-it, he raises Angora goats and weaves wall hangings."

Jason's eyebrows were practically up in his hair. I could tell he was amazed that a woman Maggie's age would have a boyfriend. Then reminded myself that might not be the reason. It could be because Cal wove wall hangings, not something one usually associates with a man who makes his living messing around with goats, plumbing and greasy engines.

When we went out the back door, Cal was just walking down the driveway, his baseball cap sitting on the back of his thinning, graying, carrotty head of hair. He was lean and lanky, well over six feet. When he and Maggie danced, they looked like Mutt and Jeff.

I did the introductions before I realized why he was joining us for coffee. He'd heard about the squatters I'd invited into my house and couldn't wait to see what they were like and contribute his own version of events to the island gossip network. Cal was a couple of years past seventy and had lived on Adriana all his life, so there wasn't much he didn't know about the island or what happened on it.

We were greeted at Maggie's door by BJ. "This is BJ, the dachshund," I said to Jody and Jason. BJ's fat little sausage body, covered in long wavy, red hair, wriggled enthusiastically in response to the petting.

"Does he get along with cats, too?" Jody asked.

Maggie laughed. "He doesn't have much choice! But yes, he adores cats."

We followed her into the house and settled around the kitchen table, while she pushed the button on the coffeemaker and took the plastic wrap off a plate of chocolate chip cookies.

"Oh, there's a cat," Jason said. "She's gorgeous! Or is it 'she'?"

Shaz had come in through the cat door and was marching over to Maggie.

"Definitely a 'she,'" Cal said, grinning. "Her name is Shaz and if that name doesn't mean 'princess,' it should. When she wants attention, everybody knows about it."

"What's she look like?" Jody asked.

"She's a Ragdoll," I said. "Which means she is a heavy, solid cat and has very thick, very soft fur, mostly white but with some black and beige patches. She also has blue eyes and a great plume of a tail."

Shaz was rubbing against Maggie's ankles, but Maggie was reaching for cups and plates in the cupboard. "Shaz," she said, "I don't have time to give you a belly rub right this minute."

After a couple more attempts, Shaz gave up on Maggie, went over to Cal and began rubbing against his ankles. "Not right now, Shaz," he said, "I've got my hands full of coffee and cookies. Later!"

Ears back, Shaz glared at her recalcitrant slaves.

"She must really want a belly rub," Jason said. "She looks very annoyed."

"How can you tell when a cat is annoyed?" Jody asked.

"I can't explain it," he said, "she just looks mad."

"She has her ears back," I said, "and she's staring at Cal as if she could make him do what she wants by mental force alone."

Shaz marched over to BJ, who had curled up on the carpet just inside the archway that opened to the living room, and was apparently asleep. She whacked him hard across the face, then flopped on her back, her feet waving in the air, all of her tummy exposed. BJ got up, walked across her and lay down in the far corner of the kitchen.

Everyone burst out laughing, except Jody, who kept saying, "What? What happened?" When Jason explained that the cat had tried to get a belly rub from the dog, Jody said, "I'll give her one." She went down on her knees and called, "Shaz."

Shaz sashayed over to Jody, sniffed her, and flopped. Jody gently stroked her stomach, then rubbed harder after Maggie said, "You can be rougher. She likes a firm hand."

While Jody catered to Shaz, the rest of us got back to the coffee and cookies. Cal kept trying to find out where Jason and Jody had come from and why, without asking direct questions, and wasn't getting anywhere. Just about the time I thought he might give in to curiosity and bad manners and ask a nosy question, the cat door banged, and the other three cats came in from the pen.

Maggie said, "Here's the rest of my family." She took a bag of cat treats out of a cupboard and gave it to Jody, who was still on her knees, though Shaz had moved away as soon as she heard the cat door. "They're used to getting a treat about this time of morning. Jody, hold a treat in your closed hand until a cat has had a chance to smell you, then offer the treat in your fingers. You'll find it gets taken pretty fast and they'll come back for more. That way, you'll have a chance to touch or pet them all."

I described Smoke and Blue Eyes as they took their treats from Jody, being very polite about the whole procedure. She exclaimed over Smoke's size and the softness of his gentle meow.

"He's a big boy," Jason said, "but my guess is that this next one is king of your household." I

noticed Jason had a habit of brushing his blond hair back off his face and tucking it behind his ears.

"That's right," Maggie said. "That's Doran, lord of all he surveys." Doran hissed at Smoke, who was in his path and stalked over to Jody. He stared at her in amazement when she didn't respond to his kingly presence, and finally went closer and butted her hand.

"He certainly walks around like he owns the place," Jason said. "I'd call him Catzilla."

Jody had managed to pet Doran and feel his plumed tail before she let him have a candy. "He's lovely, not a monster at all. His tail is like Shaz's."

"He's not a Ragdoll, though," Maggie said. "He has little tufts in his ears which might mean he has some Maine Coon genes, but he's really just what's called a domestic cat."

"Those are the best kind," I said. "They may not be show cats, but they also haven't had any of their natural abilities or features bred out of them."

"But you have purebred Siamese," Jason said, raising those eyebrows at me.

"The reason I like my Siamese cats," I said, "is that they are what's known as Appleheads, which means they are the original Siamese breed brought from Siam many years ago. They're long, lean and talkative, like all Siamese, but they can never be show cats because of the crossed eyes and kinked tails."

"I have a cat called Daisy," Cal said, reclaiming his place in the conversation. "She's a real alley cat. No pampering for Daisy."

"Oh, now, Cal," Maggie said, "that's a fib. The last time I stayed over at your place, she slept between us. And I've seen you brushing her and feeding her treats."

Jason's eyebrows were almost up in his hair again. I guessed that he must have decided Maggie might have a male friend she called a boyfriend but that the relationship would be strictly platonic. I suppressed my smile and said to Maggie, "Are you writing any more ads for the *Looking For Love* column?" I very carefully did not look at Jason because if the implications of my question made him look any more surprised, I would be trying to suppress laughter, not just a smile.

"I have several to write," she said. "It's spring, you know, and the SPCA is buried under a tsunami of kittens. I think I have six cats who need ads in that column. Plus, the director wants me to foster a cat called Sir Oliver."

"I thought you'd decided not to foster any cats," Cal said, reaching for another cookie.

"I never say never." Maggie pushed the cookie plate closer to Cal. "I still might not do it, but I promised I would at least meet this cat. Melody seems impressed by him."

Cal took the last cookie and rose. "Thanks for coffee, Maggie. I have to go. I need to finish the spring tune-up on the Harley if you and I are going to take a trip over to the big island on the weekend."

I didn't even bother looking at Jason. I knew where his eyebrows would be. "I guess we'd better go, too. I have my own column to write for *Tidelines* and I know Jason has a project he wants to start."

"What's *Tidelines*?" Jody asked.

"It's a local news column for our weekly, the *Adriana Advocate*," I said. "It's just news about what's happening on the island. If I run out of news, I talk about the cats."

The kids both laughed. "You have lots of cats to talk about," Jody said.

Maggie smiled at them. "If you stay for the summer, you'll get a good education in both cats and Roman history. Holly tells me you're vegetarian, so I'll be asking you to come and have supper with me sometimes, since I'm one, too, and I'm always experimenting with new dishes."



"We'd enjoy that," Jason said. He thanked her for the coffee, and the three of us headed back to my house.

My first stop was the kitchen, to decide what I might make for lunch. Jason and Jody went upstairs and came back down, loaded with camera equipment. He stopped in the doorway to the mud room and said, "Was Cal talking about a Harley Davidson?"

"Yes, he was."

Jason took a breath. "Do you think he'd take me for a ride on it?"

"Me, too!" Jody said.

"I'm sure he would," I said. "He's very proud of that machine."

"Wow," Jason said quietly, and for the first time, I saw the little boy underneath the responsible adult man.

After they had gone, I went back to my computer and did more work on a short mystery story I'd been playing with for months. I don't know why I bothered; the market for short stories had shrunk so much that my chances of getting any published were now down to less than zero. But you can't win the lottery unless you buy a ticket, so I kept plugging away. Besides, writing stories made me happy and made time fly.

The time flew so well that when I heard Ben come in the back door, I couldn't believe it was already after one o'clock. I went down the hall to greet Ben and his satellite, Nicky, and make a quick, belated sandwich.

"What new weird fact did Duff give you?" I asked when Ben appeared again, having changed back into his working clothes.

"He told me a new word," Ben said. "Lethologica. It's a psychological condition and describes the state of not being able to remember the word you want."

"Are you serious? I've had that most of my life."

"I just looked it up," he said. "It was established by Jung as a mental condition way back in 1913. I thought it might come from Latin, but it originated in Greece. In Greek mythology the Lethe, called the River of Oblivion, was one of the rivers that flowed through Hades. The shades of the dead were forced to drink from it in order to forget their past lives on Earth."

"That's not such a bad idea," I said. "What about the rest of the word?"

"Oh," Ben said, shaking a dead mouse out of his boot. "That damn Caesar has been hunting again." He tied his boot laces. "Logos just means word."

"Interesting. I had no idea such a common failing has such a serious name. I can use that bit in my *Tidelines* column."

"So what else did Duff have to say?"

"Nothing much." Ben headed for the back door, but said over his shoulder, "You know, I think being a trustee is telling on Duff. He's aging fast. Has a lot more gray hair than the last time I saw him."

Ben went out and I heard the clang of the garbage can lid after he threw the dead mouse away.

I went back to my office with a tuna sandwich, wondering if I should tell Ben that Duff had confided at the last meeting that he was going to quit dyeing his hair. And also wondering, if we were to buy one for him, whether Caesar could learn to use a tiny freezer. No, that would never work. A tiny freezer would look like a box and Caesar would just try to sleep in it.



## Chapter IV -- Sir Oliver

One morning a few days later, I was sitting at the kitchen table reading the latest issue of *Tidelines* when Jason and Jody came in from a walk down to the beach. "Help yourself to coffee, if you like," I said. "I just made a fresh pot. Ben should be here in five minutes."

When they were sitting down with their mugs, I pushed the paper across to Jason, with the page open at my column. "I gave you a mention in *Tidelines*. I said that the up-and-coming young artist, Jason Winter, would be living and working on Adriana for the next few months."

He looked startled, then worried, and I noticed Jody was biting her lip. But when Jason spoke, his tone was normal. "Thanks, Holly, that was kind of you." He continued reading the column while Ben came in with Nicky and got his own coffee.

Finally, Jason looked up. "Do you think that'll bring out some buyers?"

"Not by itself," I said, "but if you agree, I could speak to Olivia, the owner of the little gallery in Mora Bay, and see if she would be willing to hang some of your work. You need to be shown in galleries in order to get your name known."

He frowned and brushed his hair back off his face. "I suppose I do. But I can't afford to get my pieces framed."

"If Olivia likes your stuff, she'll probably do the framing and take the cost off what she gets from sales," Ben said. "At least, that's what Cindy Parker told me one day when we had some of the cats into the animal hospital for their shots."

"Cats get shots? What for?" Jody sounded surprised.

"All kinds of things," I said. "They not only have different personalities, like humans, they also have medical problems, though not as many as we do. They get shots for rabies, feline leukemia, peritonitis and FIV, which is related to HIV in people."

"I had no idea," Jody said. "I don't suppose they like getting needles."

"They don't," Ben said, "any more than I like what it does to my budget."

"Oh, come on!" I snaffled another cookie. "I know perfectly well you put enough in your budget to cover medical expenses for our feline family. You just like to grumble about it."

Ben grinned. "You know me too well!" He rose. "All right, I'm off to the greenhouse to try and get caught up. Everything out there is growing like a weed. And the weeds are growing twice as fast."

Jason was looking at *Tidelines* again. "I see you're having a poetry contest. Any particular reason?"

"If you read a little further along, you'll see I said this contest is just for fun, as part of the celebration of the museum and tourist office opening. I wanted to do something a little different. If I get bored reading my own column, I guess readers do, too."

"Maybe I'll try my hand at it," Jody said. "I like poetry. Well, some poetry."

"Haiku is pretty simple," I said, "but that doesn't mean it's easy to do it well."

"What's haiku?" she asked.

"It's a three-line Japanese form and, to qualify, it must have five syllables in the first line, seven syllables in the second line, and five in the third. They are usually about nature, or humans in nature, and those originating in Japan have a definite Zen flavor."

"Five, seven and five," Jody repeated. "I'll see what I can come up with. When's the deadline?"

"The May long weekend," I said. "My boss, Scott, says that I have to be the judge because

I'm a writer, but I don't really think I should. You have to be so careful when you're in politics not to appear to be handing out any favors in case somebody thinks you're trying to buy votes."

"But you told me being a trustee is a volunteer job," Jason said, "and that you don't get paid anything except expenses. So why would you bother buying votes?"

I put the empty plate in the sink. "There are circumstances when I'd be quite willing to buy votes if I could get away with it, and that's if someone running against me wants to get elected so they can do something evil to the island."

"What kind of evil?" Jody asked.

"Too much commercial development. Over-exploitation of natural resources."

"Oh, I get it," Jason said. "Like when you had to work to get that park property established as park rather than let it be developed as a luxury resort."

"Exactly. But this haiku contest is just a little fun thing. We're going to display the best ones at the museum after it opens. Scott says we'll give twenty dollars as first prize, ten as second, and I've no idea what he's decided about third prize, or even if there'll be one. But he'll have to make a decision quickly so I can put that information in the next column."

Jason pushed his chair back from the table. "I'm going upstairs to work. Coming, Jody?"

"I am," she said. "Ming and Kaylie are probably on our bed by now and maybe they'd like to cuddle with me for a while."

The two young people went up the stairs and I went down the hall to my den, where I found George the Magnificent stretched out in a patch of sunshine on my big stuffed chair. He blinked sleepily at me and purred when I stroked him. Cato was curled up on the floor beside the chair, in the lowly position suitable to disciples.

I had just opened the laptop and brought up Google so I could read my mail when the phone rang.

"Hi, Holly," Duff said. "I just read *Tidelines*. Is Jason's work really so good you're willing to say that in your column?"

"He's that good, Duff. Really. I'm blown away by what he creates. My next step is to see if Olivia will hang some of his work in her gallery."

I could almost see Duff shaking his head. "You just never know, do you? I figured anybody squatting like they were doing must be just worthless sponges."

"My turn to quote somebody, Duff. I don't know who said this but it's true. Don't judge a book by the cover."

"Then I have one for you. At the last meeting you were complaining about gaining weight and I thought you'd like to know that every time you lick a stamp, you're consuming one-tenth of a calorie."

I laughed. "So who licks stamps anymore? We all use e-mail. Or text."

"I use e-mail well enough," Duff said, "but I haven't mastered texting yet. Oh, Holly, one other thing before I have to get back to work. Maybe you should start Ben on some vitamins. At lunch last Friday, it seemed to me that he's aged a lot in the last couple of months."

After I hung up the phone, I did some headshaking of my own. In addition to competing with Roman quotes and weird facts, were Duff and Ben now competing on who was aging the fastest? They'd be better off competing in my poetry contest, but I was willing to bet neither one had the patience to try.



After lunch Maggie phoned. "Melody at the SPCA wants me to come and meet Sir Oliver. Could I prevail on you to drive me? Cal is busy today."

"Of course, I'll drive you. I want to see this wonder cat, too."

Ten minutes later, we headed down Macklin Road, on our way across the island. I said, "The SPCA doesn't usually get into fostering animals, does it?"

"No," Maggie said. "But Melody fell in love with this boy and she's willing to bend some rules, so she doesn't have to have him put down."

"If he's so wonderful, why has nobody adopted him?"

"Two reasons, apparently." Maggie adjusted her seat belt. "One is that they have a flood of kittens, and kittens are cute, so they get adopted first. The second is that Sir Oliver did something very bad, and a lot of people have heard about it. You know how news travels on this island."

I knew. With the help of e-mail and cell phones, it often seemed instantaneous. I wondered what Sir Oliver had done that was so bad it deserved to be gossiped about. Spraying in the house? Clawing the furniture? Racing through the house and yowling at three a.m.? None of those seemed serious enough to warrant so much attention.

When we went into the SPCA reception area, Melody, a tall woman with black hair and a warm smile, invited us into her office. "I'll bring Oliver in here," she said, "so you can get to know him without interference from other cats or people."

Maggie and I sat in visitors' chairs and Melody was back a minute later, carrying a large, dark-gray tabby in her arms. She put him on the floor, where he gave us barely a glance and began checking out his surroundings. He had distinctive tabby markings and a thick plume of a tail. His fur was thick, too, and longer than is usual for a shorthaired cat. His only markings other than black and gray were a small white area around his mouth and a sand-colored nose.

"His eyes are green," I said, "and that fur makes him look like the luxury version of tabby cats. Like the Mercedes Benz of the cat world."

"He's definitely royalty," Maggie said. "His attitude confirms that. He's examining his new throne room, with never a glance for the servants."

Melody smiled. "Sometimes his eyes look yellow. I think it depends on the light. And yes, there's no doubt he thinks he owns the world."

"How does he feel about being petted?" I asked.

"He likes attention," Melody said, "but you may have to bribe him with a cat candy." She pushed a small pack of them across her desk to us.

The candy did the trick, of course. As soon as he smelled it, he came around the desk to see who had the treasure. Maggie held out her candy so he could get the full effect, then invited him onto her lap to get it. He jumped up without coaxing and Maggie ran her fingers through that thick hair. "Oh, you are a lovely boy!" she crooned.

After he settled down on Maggie's lap, his paws hanging over her knees, I turned to Melody. "What did this bad boy do that makes him unadoptable?"

"It's sad, really," Melody said, leaning back in her swivel chair and watching Maggie and Oliver enjoying their love-in. "His owner, Arlene, raised him from a tiny kitten and he's five years old now. She told me he's always been a bit arrogant and demanding, but they had a good relationship."

"Was he an indoor cat?"

"Indoor-outdoor," Melody said. "Arlene and her family live on a couple of acres and they felt it was cruel to keep him in. Or perhaps they didn't have much choice. I can certainly imagine Sir Oliver ripping down a door to get outside if that's what he wants. Anyway, they had no

problem with him until a new neighbor moved in next door with a big white tomcat."

"Oh dear," I said. "Territorial battles?"

Melody sighed. "All-out war, from what Arlene told me. Oliver came home bleeding a couple of times and she had to bring him in to see Jerry and get stitched up. She talked to the owners of the white cat, and they said they would try to keep it inside, but of course, that didn't work because both cats insisted on going outside."

"Something worse than that must have happened," I said. "Fighting over territory doesn't usually go beyond torn ears and infected bites."

"A month or so ago," Melody went on, "Arlene heard cats squalling outside but it was over in a couple of minutes. Her husband let Oliver in, since she was heading into the shower. The cat appeared at the bathroom door just as she was about to close it and demanded entry. She said she'd got so fed up with his demands that she decided to make a joke of it. So she bowed and swept her arm out in a welcoming gesture while she said, 'Enter, your majesty!'" Melody sighed again.

"And?" I prompted. "Then what?"

"Oliver leapt up, sunk his claws into her bare arm and bit her."

"Whoa!" I was truly shocked. "No wonder nobody wants to adopt him. I'm surprised she didn't have him put down after that."

"She tried to," Melody said. "Not only did she develop a serious infection, but she was afraid to be around him. She didn't want to give him away in case he did the same thing to some unsuspecting new owner, or worse, to some child. So she asked Jerry to euthanize him, and Jerry refused."

"I would have thought euthanasia was the only sensible solution," Maggie said, giving Sir Oliver, still purring in her lap, a doubtful glance.

"Jerry wouldn't do it because, so he said, Oliver is a young, healthy animal. His take on the situation was that on the night in question, Oliver had come into the house with his adrenaline high because of fighting with the white cat and when Arlene made that gesture with her arm, he saw the arm as a threat rather than as belonging to someone he liked and trusted."

This time I joined Melody in a sigh. "From my experience, I'd say most vets would agree with him."

Maggie said, "That is very sad. You can't blame Arlene for being afraid of Oliver. But you also can't blame him for reacting in a way natural for him in the circumstances."

"I think he's worth saving," Melody said, "but it's tough, because I can't lie to prospective adopters." She looked at Maggie. "What do you think? Are you willing to give it a try, say for a couple of months?"

Maggie looked at me. "I don't know what to do. Oliver is beautiful and I'd love to keep him for a while, but he and Doran would kill each other."

"Not only that," I said, "but if Oliver likes to roam outside, how are you going to keep him inside and not have the house ripped apart or go crazy listening to him yowl? You certainly couldn't let him outside on Holly Haven, because George and Kaylie are both territorial."

"There must be a way." Maggie was getting that stubborn look on her face, the one that always made me want to run for cover. "Melody, can I think it over for a day?"

Melody rose. "Yes. But let me know soon." She took Oliver from Maggie's lap and cuddled him in her arms. "Come on, bad boy, back to your cage."

Maggie glanced over her shoulder as we walked out of the building. "I hate the thought of him being in a cage. He's a beautiful animal and deserves to meet the world on his own terms."

"As long as he doesn't hurt anyone," I said. "Human or feline."

"Let's go see if Jerry has time to talk to us," Maggie said.

I agreed and we headed over to Jerry's animal clinic. I always enjoyed seeing the young veterinarian who looked after our six-pack of felinity.

Jerry's wife, Cindy was in charge of reception today and I was glad to see her, too. Sometimes she and Jerry arranged a bridge game with me and whoever they could find as a fourth. "Does Jerry have ten minutes to spare or is he booked solid?"

"Let me go check," she said, slipping into the examination room. She came back followed by Jerry. He still looked to me as if he'd just graduated from high school, but I knew he and Cindy had two boys in their early teens.

"I have ten minutes," he said. "The last patient took his shot like a little hero and is already on his way home, clutched to the breast of a very surprised owner."

"Jerry has a way with animals," Cindy said proudly.

"We know," I said. "We represent ten of his patients. No, twelve, counting the two dogs. He has a way with people, too. Sometimes I've thought he should set up a psychiatric practice next door."

"Enough blarney," Jerry said, leaning against the counter. "What's the problem?"

"Sir Oliver."

"Ah yes," he said. "I've met Sir Oliver, and I imagine almost everyone on the island has heard of him by now."

"So you know his story," Maggie said. "I'm thinking of fostering him for a couple of months, until someone adopts him, but the situation at my house doesn't lend itself to taking in another aggressive, territorial cat. He and Doran would be at each other's throats." She took a breath. "So far, I've come up with the idea of keeping him in my spare bedroom so that he and my other cats don't get tangled up. But Melody says Oliver likes to be outside and that he will probably claw and scream if he doesn't get his way."

"And you know, of course," I added, "that we couldn't let him outside at Holly Haven."

"Of course not," Jerry said. "Little Kaylie would make mincemeat of him." He fiddled with a pencil for a second or two. "I'd suggest tranquilizers, but I don't really like drugging cats, except for one-time events like moving house. One of the side-effects of tranquilizers is that they block inhibitory impulses. That means a tranquilized cat may stop using the litter box or may bite and scratch at the slightest provocation. So I don't think tranquilizers are a good idea for a cat who has already shown that he's very good at biting and scratching. On the other hand, he's not a candidate for behavior modification techniques."

"I'd agree, especially as he's not strictly an indoor cat," Maggie said. "Anyway, his bad behavior isn't a habit. According to Melody, he only did it because he'd already been thoroughly aroused by a territorial fight and his adrenaline high had changed him from a lap-cat to an attack cat."

Jerry nodded. "Nobody can control or modify his behavior when he's running free. I could prescribe something like Valium, but it can cause serious liver problems. There are also progestins, but they have serious side-effects as well. I can't prescribe anything I'd like to see you using long-term."

"I don't want to keep him long-term," Maggie said. "Melody thinks he's worth saving and so do I, but I'm only considering taking him because she has so many cats for adoption right now that he might have to be put down. I'm willing to try it but I don't want him to damage the house or me because he's frustrated."

"What about catnip?" I asked. "That's supposed to be a sedative. Except I've never seen it affect my cats that way. The ones that go for it, like George, just get high and silly for a little while."

Jerry smiled. "That's because they're sniffing it, right? Catnip only acts as a sedative when it's eaten."

"Ah!" Maggie exclaimed, glancing at me with a twinkle in her eyes. "I could bake some catnip brownies for Oliver."

"Or Valerian salmon cakes," Jerry said, grinning. "Valerian is one herb that works on cats the same as catnip. Some drool & roll on the floor, some become very hyperactive, some become aggressive and pick fights with other cats. But," he added, "you'd have to let me advise you on how much to use. An overdose can cause stomach upsets and extreme fatigue."

"From the sounds of it, Oliver could use a little extreme fatigue," Maggie said, her tone wry.

"All drugs seem to have side effects," I said.

"They do." Jerry nodded. "It's a matter of keeping a balance and that isn't always easy."

"I'm not discouraged," Maggie said. "I think I'm going to try it, but I'll do myself a favor and see if a night's sleep will make me change my mind."

"Let me know how it works out," Jerry said. "I'll do what I can to help." He turned to me. "How are you managing with your squatters?"

"Oh, gosh," I said, "you've heard about them, too."

Jerry grinned. "I'd be surprised if there's anybody left on the island who hasn't."

"I'm doing fine and so are they. That young man has the makings of a great artist. That's only my opinion, of course. I'm hardly an expert."

"Does either one play bridge?" he asked. "Cindy and I haven't had a game in a long time, and I miss it."

"I don't know for sure," I said, "but I doubt it." I was about to ask if Frank Lansing was still playing when the clinic door opened, and a young girl came in wearing a worried look and carrying a cage with a small ginger cat in it.

Jerry greeted her and said, "Come in the examination room and let's see how this little boy is getting on."

Maggie and I said goodbye to Cindy and went back out on the street. "Anybody else you want to talk to?" I asked.

"No, let's go home so I can think about how to handle Sir Oliver. The first thing I'll do is write an ad for him for the *Looking For Love* column in the *Advocate*. Actually, that's another reason Melody wanted me to see him today."

After we were in the car and heading for home, I asked, "Are you going to mention this to Cal? He might have some ideas."

Maggie laughed. "No, dear, I'm not. You know, much as I love Cal, he does have a blind spot about cats. He'd just say that he's never had a problem like that with his Daisy and therefore Arlene, Melody and Jerry are all making a mountain out of a molehill."

"He's right that Daisy has never been a problem. What Cal doesn't realize is that cats have different personalities. Daisy is not aggressive. She minds her own business and has never, so far as I know, trespassed on George's territory. Again, so far as I know, George has never ventured off our five acres or attempted to invade some other cat's home territory. He chased off one interloper, Blackjack, a cat I was trying to adopt, and he may have chased others off, but I don't think there have been any fights."

"He didn't chase Henry away."

"No," I said. "That's always been a puzzle, but I suspect it may have been his idea to adopt Henry. Or perhaps it was because Henry was wounded, and George thought he needed help. I guess I'll never know the answer." It still made me sad to think about Henry, who died far too young of complications from FIV. But at least I'd had my cheerful gray Buddhist boy in my life for a couple of years.

"I wish cats could talk," Maggie said. "If Oliver was a five-year-old human, I'd know exactly how to deal with him."

"I'm sure you would. But from the stories I've heard, I doubt that five-year-old human boys are any more interested in listening to reason than five-year-old cats. But maybe you could apply the same principles. Give it a try, anyway."

"Yes, dear, I will," Maggie said, and lapsed into silence.



It was Jason and Jody's turn to make supper that evening, and they did so while I sat at the kitchen table with the laptop, reading e-mail between answering questions as to where they could find various items. I noticed Jody breaking the whole wheat spaghetti into bite-sized lengths.

"Why are you doing that?" I asked.

"Spaghetti is just too hard to handle in those long strings. Jason used to cut it up for me after it was cooked, but this is a lot easier."

"What a good idea! I never would have thought of that."

Jody grinned. "I've gotten so much practice; I can do it with my eyes closed."

I laughed, of course. I was feeling better all the time about these two. And when Ben and I had finished our pre-supper drinks and come back into the kitchen, we were presented with heaping dishes of pasta and hearty vegetable sauce. They used as much Parmesan on their plates as I did on mine and I felt grateful that, though they wouldn't eat meat, they were okay with eating food that animals produced.

I had just thanked them for the delicious meal when the sound of scratching at the sliding door to the cedar deck drew everyone's attention. Jason exclaimed, "Look at that! Jody, it's a mother raccoon and four little ones." He turned to Ben. "Do they want to come in?"

"No, they want food. They must be hungry, because they're here much earlier than usual." Ben rose, went to the mud room, and came back with a tin can full of dog kibble.

I said, "We would never let them into the house. Not only is this the basic home territory for the cats, the raccoons might panic and hurt one of them accidentally."

"Do you feed them all the time?" Jason asked.

"Of course," Ben said, "I hate to see animals go hungry."

"You see before you a modern version of St. Francis of Assisi," I said. "The only reason he doesn't feed every animal and bird on the island is because his budget won't stretch that far."

"Holly is exaggerating," Ben said as he opened the screen door and went out on the deck to pour kibble into the bowl that he'd put there especially for the raccoons. "These kits are growing, and they won't have developed hunting skills yet, so I'm just giving the mother a little help."

"There's another reason, a practical one," I said. "As long as we keep feeding them, they leave the garbage can alone."

"I heard that raccoons kill cats," Jody said.

"They might do so if the cats tried to horn in on their food or get too close to the kits," I said. "But both our cats and the raccoons have been willing to give each other enough space."



The raccoon family did not wait for Ben to leave before they huddled around the kibble bowl. He came back inside and put more kibble in the can.

"Oh, Ben, look," I said, "Heracles is elbowing the other kits out of the way again. No wonder he's so much bigger than the rest of them."

"You named them all, Ben?" Jason asked, smiling.

"No, I was the one who named this lot," I said. "And I used names from Greek mythology, just to see if I could stem the tide of Roman references around here. Heracles is famous for his strength and his numerous adventures, but you probably know him better as Hercules, which is the Roman version of the name."

"What did you call the others?" Jody asked.

"The mother is Pandora because when she birthed these kits, she sure let a whole lot of trouble loose in the world."

"She's a good mother," Ben protested.

"The two female kits are Andromeda, who was a princess, and Calliope."

"Calliope is the muse of poetry," Jody said, "which doesn't seem to fit a raccoon. What about the fourth baby?"

"I decided on Icarus. In Greek mythology, he tried to escape from Crete by wearing wings constructed from feathers and wax. His father told him not to fly too close to the sun and, naturally, he didn't listen. The melting wax caused him to fall into the sea where he drowned."

"I've never understood why you think that fits," Ben said.

"Oh, maybe it's a stretch. But I'm always telling Icarus not to steal Heracles's food and Icarus always ignores me, and Heracles always knocks him into the middle of next week. Which is not as fatal as drowning, I know. And the names really don't matter, because once they grow up and go off on their own, I probably won't be able to tell them apart."

"Can I go out and feed them?" Jason asked.

"Sure," Ben said. "Sit down on the deck and rattle the tin. The kits will come to you, and you can hold the kibble in your fingers. They're quite gentle about taking it."

"Won't the mother get upset?" Jody asked.

"No," Ben said. "She seems to trust that we won't hurt the kits."

Jason sat down and the kits scooted down the steps to escape. Three of them soon returned to see what he was all about. Pandora stayed back and watched while Jason handed food out and petted the little ones. Then Heracles, having finally figured out what was going on, came lumbering back up the steps and over to Jason. Jason held out kibble for him, Heracles grabbed, and Jason yelped and scrambled to his feet, scattering the kits again. He dumped the rest of the kibble in the bowl and came inside.

"He bit me!" Jason said. "I thought you said they were gentle."

"Sorry," Ben said. "I should have warned you that he always tries to take your fingers as well as the food. I've learned to move my fingers really fast."

"The names aren't logical," I said. "In classical mythology, Heracles was both intelligent and strong. Heracles the raccoon may be very strong but he's dumb as a post."

"Did he break the skin?" Jody asked.

"No," Jason said. "Actually, I can see what Ben means. Heracles didn't bite down on my finger. It was like he was pulling it away from me along with the kibble." He stopped rubbing his finger. "No damage done. And I'd like to try that again tomorrow if I get the chance."

"I'd like to try it, too," Jody said.

"Sure," Jason said. "But I'll feed Heracles. The others were really gentle, and their little paws

feel so cool and gentle on your skin. But you won't be able to see Heracles coming." Jason pushed his chair back again. "I want to do a little more work tonight. Coming, Jody?"

The phone rang. A female voice said, "Is Jody Fielding there? This is her mother speaking. Pamela Fielding."

"Hang on," I said, and called to the kids, who had only reached the foot of the stairs. "Jody, are you Jody Fielding? Because if you are, it's your mother on the line."

I expected her to come and take the phone from me, but she didn't. She came back only as far as the door into the kitchen. Her face was white, and her hands were clenched as if she might explode from tension. She said, "I won't speak to her. I will *never* speak to her." Then she turned, nearly crashing into Jason, who was right behind her, and they hurried up the stairs. I heard the bedroom door slam.

I took my hand away from the receiver and said, "Hello? Mrs. Fielding? She doesn't want to take your call."

"She won't take it because she's drugged," said Pamela. Her voice sounded a bit as if she was on drugs herself. "That bastard she's with keeps her drugged so she'll stay with him instead of coming home where she belongs, where we can look after her. He's beaten her, and abused her, and led her a life of hell on the street. I tell you, he's evil incarnate. And you're a fool if you believe his lies."

She hung up and I stood there for a long time, staring at the phone, finding it hard to believe I'd heard her say all those unbelievable things.



## Chapter V -- Secrets

The next morning, Jason and Jody came downstairs and into the kitchen just as Ben and I were drinking our second coffee. They both looked tired and didn't seem inclined to say anything beyond a polite 'good morning.' Ben and I had discussed the phone call and he was upset because he couldn't get a handle on what was going on. He tried to make conversation by chattering about what he was going to do in the greenhouse and the garden, but nobody paid much attention to him, except for Nicky, who always hung around to the last second, hoping for more little treats from the table.

The two young people sat down with toast and coffee, much to Ming and Kaylie's disgust, since they'd been hovering for ten minutes, hoping for yogurt and bananas. I poured myself a third cup and took the plunge. "I think we need to talk about that phone call last night."

Jody reacted at once. "I suppose you're going to tell me I should phone my mother and apologize. Well, I won't."

"I'm not going to tell you anything," I said. "You're an adult and you have the right to run your life as you see fit. It's none of my business what you do or don't do about your mother. But if she phones again, I need to know what to say."

There was silence for a moment, then Jody said, "I'm sorry, Holly. It's just that she won't leave us alone. She's like one of those thorns that gets under your skin, and you can't pull it out, you have to cut it out."

"Oh, that does sound bad." My own mother had been a treasure and I couldn't imagine Maggie ever being a thorn.

"What did she say?" Jason asked.

"In essence, that you're an evil man who beats and abuses Jody and keeps her drugged so she can't go home where she will be safe." When I saw the look on Jason's face, I added, "I take it you've heard all this before."

"Many times," he said.

Ben said indignantly, "Well, I must say I've never seen any bruises on you, Jody, nor any evidence that you're high on drugs."

I saw a smile tugging at Jody's lips. "Would you know what that looked like?"

Ben snorted. "I caught my mother smoking marijuana once."

"Maggie? Really?" Jason grinned. "There is one liberated lady!" His grin disappeared. "Jody and I have never been into drugs. We've experimented a few times, but we learned that we like to see life clearly, not through a pink haze. Or purple, or whatever color it happens to be."

"Maybe your mother just assumes you do drugs, Jody. Most people seem to assume that people who live on the street are druggies." Life had also taught me that many people find it easier to make assumptions than to accept that everybody has a different story.

"I've told her the truth, but she doesn't want to believe it," Jody said. "She wants to believe Jason is evil. But he isn't."

Jason put his elbows on the table and rested his chin on his hands. "I'd be the last person to give someone else drugs," he said. "I've seen what they can do to people. My own mother is addicted to heroin and alcohol. She's made a couple of half-hearted efforts to quit but she really doesn't want to change. When I was a kid, she used to give me money to go buy drugs for her. When I got old enough to realize I was helping her destroy herself, I refused to be her errand boy. That's when she threw me out."

"How awful!" I felt like going around the table and giving him a hug. "What about your father? Didn't he care?"

Jason shrugged. "I don't know who my father is. Neither does my mother."

"This just gets worse and worse," I said.

"Not really," Jason said, leaning back. "In a way, it was a relief to get out of that apartment and away from her. I was still in high school and plenty of people knew the situation and helped me out. I worked and studied and made it through graduation."

"He went to art school for a year, too," Jody said proudly.

"How come you didn't stick with that?" I asked. "It's tough to make it as an artist, but with a degree, you could always teach part-time."

"That would work for some people," Jason said, "but not me. I don't want to teach. I don't want to do anything except draw. I learned about materials and techniques in that one year, which was something I needed, but the important thing in art is learning how to see and I've always known how to do that." He took a breath. "Sometimes I've been damn hungry, but I'm still here and my art is improving all the time."

"If you survived your so-called family life," I said, "I guess you can survive anything."

"I can as long as I have Jody with me," he said, taking her hand. "She's my anchor and my inspiration."

My curiosity was killing me. I had to ask at least one of my many questions. "How long have you two been together?"

"Six years," Jody said. "We met on a blind date."

I did a double take, realized her expression was too deadpan to be genuine, and started to laugh. Ben was laughing, too. Then the phone rang.

While Ben went to answer it, Jason asked me why we didn't at least have a cordless phone, if not a cell.

"If we had a cordless phone, one of us would probably leave it lying around where the cats could get at it. With our luck, one of them would walk across it and dial somebody in Japan and we'd be stuck with long distance charges."

Jason smiled. "In other words, you don't feel like learning a new system."

I smiled back. "I'm afraid you're right. You've only been here a week and already you've realized that I'm comfortable in my rut."

When Ben came back, wearing an odd expression, I said, "Who was that?"

"The income tax office, answering the message I left."

"Why were you phoning them?" Then I glanced at the calendar. "Oh, of course, it's April twenty-sixth and the filing deadline is only four days away."

Ben pushed his chair in. "Yes, and I'm disappointed. They won't let me claim Mr. Mighty and the hens as dependents."

I groaned. "Ben Sutton, it's time you dreamed up a new income tax joke."

"Who's joking?" He was in the mud room now, putting on his work boots. "Oh, I know what I can do." He smiled. "I'll claim Jody and Jason. They can be college students with lots of tuition fees." He headed for the back door, then came back to the kitchen door. "Maggie wants you to phone her."

I blinked. "How do you know? Oh, that's who you were talking to just now. Why didn't you just call me to the phone?"

"You were busy talking." This time he made it out the back door and a few seconds later, I saw him through the deck sliding doors, walking across the grass toward the greenhouse.

I was just turning back to Jason and Jody to continue our talk when the phone rang again. The two kids rose. "We're going for a quick walk. Talk to you later." They headed out the back door, too, picking up jackets on their way through the mud room.

I was disappointed. I had a lot more questions and they had seemed in the mood to give me answers.

It was Maggie on the phone. "How are you this morning, dear?"

"I'm fine. Why were you calling me earlier?"

"I wasn't."

"Oh. Ben said you wanted me to phone."

"I do want to speak to you, dear," Maggie said patiently, "but this is the first phone call I've made today."

"Oh. I wonder what he's up to. Obviously, he didn't want to tell me who was on the phone. And he came back with a funny look on his face."

"Can we talk about it on the way to Mora Bay, Holly? Melody phoned and said if I'm going to foster Sir Oliver, would I please come and take him right away. They got three new batches of abandoned kittens this morning."



We found a suitable cat carrier and a clean blanket for Sir Oliver's comfort, made a list of other things Maggie would need, and drove to Mora Bay.

"We have to stop at the *Advocate*, too," Maggie said. "I wrote an ad for the *Looking for Love* column."

"I hope it works," I said. "Maybe you won't have to put him on serious drugs. What did you say?"

Maggie took a piece of paper out of her bag. "Here it is. Tell me if you think anything needs changing." She handed me the paper, which read:

*DMT (divorced male tabby), just 5 years old, dignified, discriminating, affectionate, active. Seeks permanent home with warmhearted cat-savvy adults. I like the great outdoors but also romantic evenings in front of a crackling fire. No children or other cats, please.*

"It sounds fine to me," I said. "If I were reading it, I'd think this was an attractive cat but that there might be something unusual about him. Which is what you want people to think. It wouldn't be fair to anyone to lie about his history."

Oliver was not happy about the cat carrier and complained frequently as we drove home, to the point where I muttered that if Melody had ever suffered his strident voice for fifteen long miles, she might not have had tears in her eyes when we walked out the door with him. And Oliver was not the only one making a racket. The Chevy's engine had developed a squeak to add to its collection of assorted rattles.

"Maybe it's time you got a new car," Maggie said.

"I doubt if it would fit in Ben's budget. Unless, of course, he found another treasure like Bouncing Blue Betsy."

"Oh dear," Maggie said, and sighed.

We were greeted, as usual, by Nicky bouncing up and down in the driveway, his fluffy white tail waving like a flag in a strong breeze. As soon as he realized we had a cat in the carrier, he lost interest in his candy and whined for access.

"You can't have this one, Nicky. He belongs to Maggie. Besides, if he gets out, he'll

probably chew you to ribbons." Oliver, ears flattened, hissed and growled.

Finally, we got the carrier and all the paraphernalia into Maggie's house, and put the carrier in her spare bedroom fast, before her other cats realized something new was happening. BJ, who'd been sitting outside her front door, followed, wagging his tail with delight over a new cat to play with. It didn't seem to faze him that the new cat had murder in his yellow eyes and looked like he might rip the cage apart to get at the little sausage dog.

Maggie had barely shut the bedroom door before her four felines clattered in from the cat pen and lined up in front of the door. They could all smell Oliver and were eager to see who the scent belonged to. Shaz soon got bored and wandered away, followed a few minutes later by Blue Eyes and Smoke. Doran, of course, being Chief Ruler and Voice of Authority in Maggie's domain, stuck to his post, alternately sniffing and growling. Occasionally he was answered by a growl from the other side of the door.

"I can see I'll have to be very careful going in and out of that room so that Oliver doesn't get out and Doran doesn't get in," Maggie said.

"Pick your moments," I said. "You could also try holding a broom in front of your feet to brush back a cat trying to get out or in. Doran is not going to sit there forever."

Maggie ran both hands through her short auburn hair as though she was going to tear it out. "From the look of it, he intends to sit there twenty-four seven, except for quick trips to the litter box."

"I'll keep him distracted while you take food, water and the litter box in for Oliver. I take it you're going to let him out of the carrier right away?"

"Oh, yes!" Maggie exclaimed. "I couldn't leave him locked up."

I picked up Doran, who swore at me and struggled, but I have a firm, businesslike grip when it's essential, and managed to keep him immobilized until Maggie backed out of the bedroom and closed the door again, with a sigh of relief.

Doran jumped down and hurried back to the bedroom door. He looked up at the doorknob, then looked at Maggie and meowed.

"Oh, no, you don't," she said. "This does happen to be my house, no matter what you think, and you're not going to go in there and harass that poor little cat."

The poor little cat let loose a yowl that might have frightened a lion, never mind bad boy Doran. But it was only one yowl and after a moment of silence, I quit bracing myself for a serenade.

Maggie and I sat down in the living room and looked at each other. "I wonder what I've let myself in for," she said.

"Just a lot of noise, if you're lucky," I said. I took another look at her auburn hair and the end of my own black and silver braid and wondered how I'd look as a redhead. "I really have my doubts about your fostering Sir Oliver. It's going to be tough finding someone willing to take him on. And whoever adopts him will have the same problems Arlene had dealing with his aggressiveness and his battles with other cats in the area."

"When you put it like that, it does seem rather hopeless." Maggie shook her head. "But I refuse to be discouraged. Somebody will want to give him a home. I'm sure of it."

"I wonder what would happen," I mused, "if we let Nicky in with him. The dog has a thick coat to protect him and he's very patient with cats. He knows they rule the universe and he's quite willing to be a slave. That might keep Oliver distracted for a while."

"What about Ming?" Maggie asked. "He's a caretaker."

I shook my head. "I wouldn't risk that. Ming's not a fighter and Oliver might decide to take

out his frustrations on him." I glanced at my watch. "Oops! I'd better go. I had no idea it was so late and it's my turn to make supper tonight." I glanced at the bedroom door, where Doran was still sniffing, and trying to insert his paw into the room through the quarter inch of space underneath the door. "If you need any help, phone and I'll come right over."

"I will, thanks, Holly." She walked me to the front door and gave me a hug. "Of course, I could always invite Cal over for dinner and the night. If Oliver decides to yowl all night, I'd have somebody to sit up and play crib with."

I laughed. "If I know Cal, he'd just put his pants back on and walk home."



At home, as I made a big pot of vegetarian chili and got fresh cornbread ready to put in the oven, I remembered that I'd meant to ask Maggie if she knew what Ben was up to, getting mysterious phone calls and being closemouthed about it. Too late now, but I wasn't very concerned. Ben was terrible at keeping secrets.

Shortly after five, the entire population of our house gathered in the living room with drinks, Jody and Jason having decided that water with ice and lemon slices was an appropriate aperitif, and Caesar had brought a catnip mouse. He immediately began playing with it, no doubt wanting to get his share before somebody – probably George – took it away from him.

When we started to laugh at his antics, Jody stopped petting Nicky and said, "Wait! What's so funny?" Nicky immediately stuck his nose under her hand to prompt her for more attention. It hadn't taken him more than half a minute to discover that she had a soft spot for dogs.

"Sorry," Jason said. "Caesar has a catnip mouse and he started playing with it by lying on his back, kicking it with his hind feet. Now he's rubbing his chin on it and purring."

"I can hear him," Jody said, smiling.

"Now he's curling up around it in a ball," I said. "Kaylie is walking around him, looking for an opening but I don't think she's going to find it."

"Oh, now he's sitting like a meat loaf, with the mouse between his front feet," Jason said. "He looks like he's daring her to take it away from him."

"He'll get bored with it in a few minutes," I said, "then somebody else will have a game." I took a sip of my scotch and said to Jason and Jody, "Can we get back to the discussion we were having at breakfast? You don't have to tell us anything, of course, but I still do need to know what I should say to your parents if they phone again."

"They'll phone again," Jody said, "I can guarantee that. They never give up." Her face was tense but softened as she put both hands on Nicky's head and caressed his soft silken ears.

"I don't understand," I said. "You've been with Jason for six years, so surely they must have accepted by now that you know your own mind."

"No, they haven't," she said, "and I don't think they ever will." She paused. "Because I'm blind, they don't believe I can take care of myself, or speak up for myself. They're sure the world is full of people ready to exploit me for one reason or another. Sometimes I swear they don't even believe I have a mind."

"That is very sad," I said. "I know parents usually have a very strong urge to protect their children, but they seem to be carrying it to extremes."

"Sounds like OCD to me," Ben said, pushing Poppy's tail away from the foam on his stein of beer. "You know, obsessive-compulsive disorder. When I was in the Navy a million years ago, I knew an officer like that. His was a minor sort of thing, keeping his desk perfectly tidy, but I

could see, when I was in his office, that he was ruled by it."

"I suppose that's possible," Jody said. "My mother's been on antidepressants for years, too, and I don't think that helps."

Jason nodded. "Antidepressants can do some freaky things to your head. My own opinion is that this obsession they have about protecting Jody from the entire world comes from guilt feelings." He noticed my mouth open to ask a question and went on. "Jody's folks are wealthy and she's an only child so she was the center of their lives. But they've always had to travel for business and when she was six and had started school, they left her in the care of a nanny for two weeks."

Jody picked up the story. "I got an infection, and the nanny thought it was just one of those things always going around in elementary schools, so she didn't pay any attention until I got so sick, she realized it was serious. By that time, it was too late. I survived but my eyes didn't."

"So your parents have been blaming themselves for your blindness ever since," I said, stroking King George, who was honoring me with his presence instead of lording it over everyone from the top of the piano.

"I think that's part of it," Jody said. "Maybe most of it; I don't know. All I do know is that I've been fighting for independence and the chance to make something of my life ever since. On their side of it, they seemed to think they could do no less than keep me in the house, where I'd be safe, and cater to me with food, clothes and music."

"Did you go to school?" Ben asked.

"Oh yes," she said. "But they drove me there and picked me up. Sometimes, one of them would even come and spend the lunch hour with me. They'd have done my homework, I think, if I hadn't been desperate to get an education so I could get out." She sighed. "It didn't help that I was three times as angry and rebellious as most teens. The tighter they hung on, the louder I screamed. I put them through some bad times."

"It's even worse now," Jason put in. "They really do seem to believe that because she can't see, she also can't hear, or think, or put one foot in front of the other without help. It's like they're frantic to get her back into their house and keep her there."

"Don't they understand that an education would give you freedom and independence?" I asked.

Jody shook her head. "I don't think they'd have let me go to school at all if it hadn't been against the law to keep me out. I demanded to go to college, and they wouldn't hear of it. No matter what I wanted, they insisted that it was their privilege and joy to take care of me." She smiled. "I did accomplish one thing, though. I got Toby."

"Who's Toby?" Ben asked, coming back from the kitchen with a second scotch for me and a beer for himself.

"My Seeing Eye dog," she said. "They didn't want me to have one, because they didn't like the idea of me walking around outside on my own. But I managed to get in touch with the Canadian Institute for the Blind and the people there agreed it was essential. My parents raised every objection they could, but the counselor more or less shamed them into agreeing. When they finally gave in, they said they'd done so because it would be nice for me to have a pet."

"A Seeing Eye dog isn't a pet," I said. "They're working dogs."

"Exactly." Jody nodded. "Toby was wonderful. We walked for miles. And, when I found out I could get a pass and ride the buses free, I was in heaven. I used to go to downtown Vancouver and walk there, too. That's where I met Jason. We met and talked many times before we ever had a date."



"Did you go for coffee together, things like that?"

Jody laughed. "Fat chance! Part of my parents' control system was making sure I didn't get my hands on any money. And Jason rarely had money to spare, even for coffee."

I just kept shaking my head. "That is really awful. No wonder you don't want to have anything to do with your parents, either of you. So, what do I say when they call? That you're not here or you don't want to speak to them?"

"Whatever you think," Jody said. "I don't want to see them, talk to them or have anything to do with them. Period."

"Okay, I can handle that. What happened to Toby?"

"He died of distemper a year or so after I met Jason. My parents were dead set against me getting another dog and I knew I had to get out then or be stuck forever. Jason came and got me, and we've been together ever since."

"What I want to know," Ben said, as he shooed us toward the kitchen and supper, "is how did they find out where you are?"

"I think they had somebody following us in Victoria," Jason said. "There was a face I saw several times, and he was paying more attention to us than most people do."

I ladled out chili and put the hot cornbread on the table. The fur brigade gathered around the table as usual when we sat down, but the absence of any meat smells made them less eager about nagging for nibbles than they usually were. I'd just downed my first mouthful of chili when I remembered something. "Oh, dear, do you think my article in the *Advocate* led them to you?"

"I wondered about that, too," Jason said. "But the tail probably followed us when we left Victoria and knew we were on Adriana before we ever met you."

"If the tail stayed in Mora Bay and got people talking, he'd quickly have found out about the squatters in Norma's house," I said. "And I don't suppose there's anyone on the island now that doesn't know you're living here."

We concentrated on food for a few minutes. The human people were happy about the meal and said so. The fur people resigned themselves to lying down and waiting for dessert. Whether they thought I might produce tuna topped with whipped cream, I didn't know, but they never seemed to give up hope.

Afterwards, sitting with coffee and cookies, I asked Jody if she still wanted to go to college.

"Yes, I do. I want to get a good education so I can earn a living for Jason and me while he works on his career. Well, not only that. I want to do something useful with my life." She held up her hand as if to stop me from speaking. "Yes, I realize this will take years, but it doesn't matter."

Jason said, "She's been working on it for as long as I've known her. She's spent a lot of hours in libraries, reading Braille books and also reading things online if the library has a computer with a screen reader." He sighed. "But it's tough when you have no money. I can't afford a computer. We can't even afford a cell phone or an iPad, say." He took Jody's hand in his. "I've tried to convince her to let me go find a job of some kind, but she keeps saying no."

"Art is his life," Jody said. "I won't let him give that up. I can find a way to get what I need. I don't know how, but I will."

If Jody's parents had been in the room, I'd have wrung both their necks. "So, when you do get to college, what do you want to study?"

"Psychology," she said. "I'm interested in people and what makes them think and do things in different ways. And it's a portable profession. It doesn't matter where we go. I'd always be able to find a job as a counselor."

Ben got up and poured more coffee. "I thought counselors and shrinks had to be able to see

expressions and body language in order to interpret what people were saying."

"Sight would be handy, but it's not essential," Jody said. "My sense of hearing has become more acute, which makes up for the lack of sight. I pick up many cues from how people speak and breathe, when they're squirming in a chair, and so on."

"She's right about her capabilities," Jason said. "Sometime in the last few months, we read an article on the internet about a blind policeman in Belgium."

"A policeman!" I exclaimed. "That sounds impossible."

Jody laughed. "Wait till I tell you. This officer is one of six blind policemen in a unit that transcribes and analyzes wiretap recordings. If I remember right, they got the idea from Holland, which also has blind cops."

"So they listen to wire taps?" Ben asked.

"Yes." Jody reached for another chocolate chip cookie and found the plate empty.

Ben jumped up. "I'll get more." Nicky rose, too, wagging his tail. I was sure he recognized the word 'cookie' even if he usually failed to understand 'sit,' 'stay,' or 'chase deer.'

When everyone was settled again, Jody continued. "When police eavesdrop on a suspected terrorist making a phone call, this policeman can listen to the tones dialed and immediately identify the number. If he hears the sound of a voice echoing off of a wall, he can tell whether a suspect is speaking from an airport lounge or a crowded restaurant."

"Isn't that incredible?" Jason said. "And, from the sound of an engine on a wiretap, he can tell whether a suspect is driving a Peugeot, a Honda or a Mercedes."

"Nicky can do that," I said. "Ben says Nicky recognizes the sound of my car as much as five minutes before I get home. But it's not surprising. Something I can barely hear from a hundred feet away, he can hear from a quarter of a mile away, or more."

"Toby could do that, too," Jody said. "When I realized how much better his hearing was than mine, I let go some of my anger about the restrictions that my blindness and my parents had forced on me and focused on training myself to listen more intently."

"I don't suppose this Belgian policeman goes out on raids or anything like that," Ben commented.

"No," Jody said. "Apparently he spends most of his time in an office. At the station where he works, they've installed elevators with voice-activated buttons, and each blind officer has a special computer equipped with a Braille keyboard, and a voice system that transmits visual images into sound."

"That sounds both complicated and wonderful," I said.

Jody sighed. "I'd love to have a computer that has all the tools available for blind people."

In the silence that followed, I thought about how unlikely it seemed that she would ever have her wish. She had talked about restrictions forced on her by her disability and her parents, but the restrictions she had placed on herself and Jason were just as rigid. Even if he found a job for just a year, he might be able to save enough for a computer, or for her to go to college for a year.

But who was I to judge? They had to choose their own way of living and facing the future. The only thing I could do was to help Jason become better known as an artist. And, since I wasn't part of the art world, my help might not amount to much.

My reverie was interrupted by the raccoon family arriving. This time Ben handed Jason the tin of dog kibble. "You go out and fill the dish," Ben said. "Once they get used to your smell and the way you move, they won't be quite so skittish."

Jason filled the dish, then came back for another tin of kibble. He took the tin and Jody out

on the deck. She sat on the steps with kibble in her fingers for the kits and it wasn't long before they were taking food from her hand. A look of wonder suffused her face when one of the kits held her hand in his paws. When Heracles came up the steps, Jason succeeded in feeding him without losing a finger.

When Jody came back in, she said, "They talk! They talk to each other all the time. If I listened long enough, I bet I could understand what they were saying."

"You probably could," Ben said. "Animals must like you. Those kits settled down with you a lot faster than they did with me."

"Maybe they sense that I'm not a threat to them."

"If they understand that you can't see them, they would feel more secure," I said. "Anyway, from what I've read and experienced, adult animals, including humans, rarely attack the babies of another species. Probably because baby animals are not threatening."

Ben rustled the newspaper he was reading over his last cup of coffee. "Listen to this. Here's a way we can make all our cats pay for themselves."

"Cats aren't as stupid as people," I said. "They don't work."

"Ha!" Ben snorted. "Of course they don't work when they have suckers like us to feed and house them. I think some of these foreign countries are way ahead of us in some areas. Listen to this. 'Cat cafes are a new phenomenon sweeping through Japan.'"

"Cat cafes! You mean cafes where cats can order a meal?" I asked.

Ben shook his head. "No, it's a place where humans go to drink tea or coffee and pet cats. It says, 'Japanese research has shown that the more time we spend touching pets, the longer we live. Petting a cat satisfies our basic need for touch.'"

"The same research has been done in North America," I said. "Everybody knows that having pets makes people live longer."

Ben was not to be deterred. "This reporter says she was taken into a large room with a café bar in one corner and hundreds of cats wandering around or sitting on armchairs. She says lots of people were there, holding cats on their laps, stroking them, talking to them."

"We don't have hundreds of cats," I said. "We only have six."

"When they're trying to take my lunch away from me," Ben said, "it feels like there are hundreds of them."

Jody and Jason were both grinning. "Fur-covered counselors," Jody said.

Ben nodded. "The reporter says they were all purring, so they were enjoying their work. She had a coffee and played with four separate cats, and then her time was up."

"That makes sense money-wise," I said. "It would be like our medical appointments, right? Fifteen minutes and you're done."

Ben folded up the paper. "I've got it all figured out. George can run the show, with Cato as his personal assistant. Kaylie will be decorative, and Ming will interact with customers, along with Caesar. Poppy will smell out cheaters. Oh, and we can bring Blue Eyes and Smoke over here to interact with customers as well." He nodded sagely. "And I will collect the money."

"Uh huh," I said, "and who is going to make the coffee and tea?"

Three faces turned toward me. "Well, you are," Ben said. "You're the one with opposable thumbs."



## Chapter VI -- Threats

During the next week, we welcomed the merry month of May which brought a wealth of pale pink and white apple blossoms in the orchard. Ben had filed our income tax returns, still grumbling because he couldn't claim the kids, the cats, or the hens as dependents. Jason had gone into work mode, spending every daylight hour on his paintings. Jody explored the house until she could go almost anywhere in it without hesitation and when that palled, Ben invited her to the greenhouse to learn how to weed. It took very little time for her to distinguish between vegetables and weeds. He wanted to pay her, but she refused on the grounds that we were giving her and Jason living space rent-free.

And every single day, there was a phone call from the Fieldings. Sometimes it was Pamela, sometimes Parker. When Jody was out, I told them that. If she was in the house, I said she wouldn't speak to them. Most of the time, they pleaded for cooperation and tried to convince me that Jody's life was in danger. Parker had made the most recent call and threatened me with legal action.

"What on earth can you possibly charge me with?" I demanded.

"I don't know, but I'll find out," he said. "You're colluding with a drug dealer." Then he hung up and I went out to the greenhouse and told Ben.

"Don't worry," Ben said. "We haven't done anything wrong. And if they show up here, I'll set Kaylie on him. Or, even better, Mr. Mighty." Ben was trying to make light of the situation, but I knew he was concerned.

I spent part of every day at Maggie's, trying to amuse Sir Oliver and placate the rest of the fur crew while she took a break. I had suggested to her that she put him in the carrier and throw a blanket over it, but she would do that only when she was desperate. She insisted it wasn't fair to lock him up.

"He's driving me insane," she said on Friday morning. "He wants out. And Doran wants in. I don't blame either one of them, but I wish they would enjoy their impossible dreams without yowling about it. And without scratching at that door. They're going to wear a hole through it."

"You look exhausted," I said. Her face was pale and drawn and she looked closer to her eighty-two years than I'd ever seen her. "Let's go see Jerry and get something to calm Oliver. You need your sleep. The door isn't a problem. We can replace that when this is over."

I called Jerry's office to make sure his schedule wasn't crammed and ten minutes later we were in the car, headed for Mora Bay. We sat in the waiting room at the clinic for a few minutes while he finished with a patient.

When he emerged, he glanced at his watch and said, "I can give you about five minutes." He took a closer look at Maggie. "Have you tried sleeping pills?"

"For me?" she said. "Yes, and they aren't strong enough. I want sleeping pills for Sir Oliver."

"I came up with a different solution after you left here last week," he said. "And you don't need a prescription, either."

"No matter what you say, I will not strangle him," Maggie said firmly. "Even if I want to at times."

"Try diphenhydramine," Jerry said. "That's Benadryl, an antihistamine. It has sedative effects and will probably calm him down for a few hours at a time. Some of my colleagues have recommended it for cats who hate travel but must go with their owners in a car or on a plane."

"I'll try anything," Maggie said. "How much do I give him?"

"I gave him a thorough examination when he was brought into the SPCA," Jerry said, "and he weighs fourteen pounds. I'd suggest starting with fourteen milligrams every eight to twelve hours. If that doesn't work, you can double the dose, but that would be the maximum."

"Thank you," Maggie said.

Jerry waved his hand at both of us. "Don't do that with any of the other cats without bringing them in for a panel of tests," he said. "Cats with glaucoma, high blood pressure, difficulty urinating, or prostate problems shouldn't use it. None of the cats at Holly Haven had those problems last time I checked, but don't take any chances."

We thanked him again and went to the drug store for Benadryl. On the way home, I said, "I'll help you give it to him. I'd suggest doing it tonight, maybe around nine, so that both of you can get a night's sleep. Then if that works, we can give him another dose in the morning."

"If it doesn't work," Maggie said, "I'll ask Jerry for one of the other drugs. I can't keep up this routine much longer. It's not just lack of sleep. It upsets me so much to listen to him crying and know that I can't give him the freedom he wants."

"Well, you're doing your best. If it weren't for you, he probably wouldn't be alive. It's just too bad he'll never realize that." What worried me was that if Maggie kept on being so stressed out, she might get sick. "No phone calls from the ad in *Looking for Love*?"

"Not yet," she said. "That issue only came out this morning."

"Oh, right. I'd forgotten. This past week felt like a month long." I told her about the phone calls from the Fieldings and she sympathized, shook her head, and said that as soon as she got some sleep, she'd invite the kids for dinner.

When we arrived back at Holly Haven, we were greeted not only by Nicky, but by Jason and Jody, just emerging from the back door. "I'm taking a break," Jason said. "I thought I'd do some photographing and relax for the rest of the day. I've got too many ideas churning around in my head and I need to chill out."

"Would you like to photograph Sir Oliver?" Maggie asked. "Maybe a picture of him in the paper would convince someone that they can't live without such a gorgeous cat. Besides, you haven't met him yet, have you?"

"No," Jason said. "I've been working. I hear he's been giving you a rough time. Sure, I'd love to photograph him."

We trooped over to Maggie's house, where Jason and Jody were greeted and sniffed by four cats and a sausage dog. Shaz, usually so calm, kept following Maggie around and meowing.

Finally, Maggie said, "Oh, all right! I'll give you some." She took a bag of green grapes from the fridge and gave two to the Princess, who sat down with a blissful expression and ate them slowly, actually daring to growl at Doran when he went over to see what she had.

Jason raised his eyebrows. "She eats green grapes? I don't believe it."

"Of course, you believe it," Maggie said. "You're watching her do it." She shook her head. "Sorry, I'm so tired that I'm getting short-tempered. That little girl is a gourmet in the feline world. She also eats raw potato, grated carrot, bacon bits and melted butter mixed with honey. Which is interesting but, on the other hand, she won't touch wet cat food. Sometimes I feel like I'm running a short-order restaurant."

"How did you find out about the melted butter and honey?" Jody was on the floor, having a love-in with Smoke. She was petting him, and he nosed at her cloud of hair and occasionally tried to lick it.

"I made pancakes one morning," Maggie said, "and when I got up to pour coffee, I came back to find her on the table, licking my plate. Then, of course, I couldn't resist giving her more."

"Before we go in to visit Sir Oliver," I said, "let's put the other four in the cat pen. That way, if Oliver gets out of the bedroom, he'll at least be contained in the house and there won't be any danger of fights."

"Good idea," Maggie said. She and I each picked up a cat and Jason picked up two. We scooted them through the cat door into the pen. Maggie dropped the seldom-used metal panel into its slot. "There, that will keep them out."

The screened window beside the door was open and I could hear Shaz wailing indignantly. "Shaz, don't be such a wimp. The sun is shining, the air is warm, and it hasn't rained for two days." I turned to Jason and Jody. "The Princess prefers soft carpet and indoor temperatures. She hates getting rain on her fur or having the wind ruffle it, and loathes getting her little white feet dirty."

Doran was complaining, too, but his yowling was distinctly angry, as though he intended to administer a severe clawing to whoever had dared to lock him out of his Kingdom.

Maggie let BJ out the back door. "He'll go to the greenhouse and help Nicky guard Ben. If we let him stay, he'll just stand outside the bedroom door and whine."

We all went into the spare bedroom, closing the door behind us. But there was no evidence of Oliver. The cat carrier sat empty in one corner, his litter box in another, and his food and water dishes in a third.

"Maybe he's frightened with so many people in here," Maggie said. "He's probably under the bed." She knelt and lifted the bed throw to peer underneath on one side of the double bed. Jason did the same on the other side. "He's not there!" she exclaimed. "But where can he be? He must have got the closet door open somehow and he's in there."

I couldn't help wondering, if that were the case, how he had shut the door to the closet. But it reminded me of Kaylie learning to open and close bifold doors when she was barely four months old. Where it concerned cats, I had come to believe that almost anything was possible.

Maggie backed out of the closet. "He's not in there! I don't understand. How could he get out?" She went to the window, but it was locked. "We'll have to search the whole house. Oh, I don't understand how this could happen." She sounded on the edge of hysteria.

"Here he is," Jason said. "He's curled up in the wastepaper basket, half-asleep."

We gathered beside the little desk under the window to look at Oliver. He was neatly curled up in the wicker basket, on top of some scrap paper, his eyes mere sleepy slits. He looked far more at home and relaxed than I'd expected.

"He's a basket case!" I said. "Or a present for somebody. All you need on that basket is a red ribbon and he could be a Christmas present."

"I'm the one who's a basket case," Maggie said. "Oliver is a basket cat."

"Was he up all last night yowling?" I asked.

"Yes, he was," Maggie said.

"I'm only guessing," I said, "but I suspect he finally got so tired that he decided to have a good sleep. Just too bad it's happening today instead of tonight."

Jason had been taking pictures of Oliver. Now he backed away from the basket and said, "He didn't seem to mind posing. See what you think of the shots." He showed us the photographs he'd taken, and I was impressed.

"Those are great!" I said.

Jason pushed his hair back. His eyes sparkled. "Oliver just gave me this great idea. I could photograph people's pets and do drawings for them. What do you think, Holly? Would that work?"

"Of course it would work!" I exclaimed. "I should have thought of that."

"Let's leave Oliver alone, so he can get his beauty sleep," Maggie cautioned. "I don't want to disturb him if he's going to be quiet for an hour or two."

We tiptoed out and closed the bedroom door.

"I'll come and take more pictures of him when he's active," Jason said. "If we get the others back in here, maybe they will pose for me."

Maggie took the metal panel out of the cat door slot and called to the cats. Not wishing to ruin their reputation for being contrary creatures, they decided that since the door was open and they could come in, they didn't want to.

"I'll go into the pen," Jason said. "It has both sunlight and shade and I should be able to get a good variety." He opened the human door to the pen and went down the two steps to the ground.

The rest of us went into the kitchen and Maggie brewed tea. "What do you think of Jason's idea, Jody?"

"He's excited about it," she said, "and that's the main thing. He can draw anything. How would we get customers, Holly?"

I laughed. "Well, you're sitting with two customers right here. Word of mouth works well on the island and if we tell Cal, he's the unofficial island telegraph. But Jason will need to provide some samples. If he can draw one of Sir Oliver that we can get the *Advocate* to print as part of a plea to adopt him, that will be a major step. I think almost everyone reads the local paper. The other thing we can do is take some of his work to Olivia's gallery and give her a brochure about Jason being available to do pet portraits."

"We can't afford to get a brochure printed," Jody said.

"It doesn't need to be printed and it doesn't need to be fancy. What I had in mind was a couple of photographs of cats with drawings to match attached to a heavy sheet of paper or cardboard, and some slips with Jason's name and this address and phone number. Just something that Olivia can put on her counter, or maybe in the window. We'll have to ask her. She'll know how to do it."

We had just drained the teapot when Jason came back in. He was looking even more pumped than when he'd gone out.

"I got some good ones," he said, "but I need to do better."

"It isn't easy to get good animal photos," I said. "They never stay still when you want them to, and a cat has no idea what you mean when you tell him to move his head a little to the right or to arrange his tail in a more attractive way. It takes enormous patience and a lot of clicking to get what you want."

"Come on, Jody," he said. "Let's go back to the house so I can take pictures of Holly's cats. Oh, and there's Nicky and BJ, too. They'll be good practice."

She rose. "Hey, I thought you were going to chill out."

"I don't need to now," he said. "I'm focused."

The two hurried out and Maggie and I watched through the window of the little entrance hall as they headed toward my house. They had just reached the far side of the garden when they met Ben coming from the greenhouse, with Nicky and BJ at his heels. Jason let go of Jody's hand and was talking and pointing to the dogs. Ben turned to Nicky, and I was sure he was telling Nicky to sit.

Nicky, of course, was usually deaf to commands he didn't want to obey, but finally Ben pushed down on his rump, and he sat, looking like a laughing clown of a dog with his ears perked up and his tongue lolling out. And of course, as soon as Jason bent to focus the camera a

little closer, Nicky took that as an invitation to play and bounced over to him, wagging his tail.

"That would have made a great picture," I said to Maggie. "Jason will have to learn to be really fast and sneaky to get a portrait of Nicky." I went back to the kitchen and picked up my bag. "I'd better go home and see what's happening about supper. I'll come over about nine, if that's okay, and we can give Sir Oliver his medicine."

Maggie nodded. "Good! But you and I will have to be very fast and sneaky with Oliver."

When I went into my own house, I found Jason in the kitchen, gazing into a cupboard.

"What are you looking for?" I asked.

"Do you have a spare cup or glass I can borrow? I just need it to put water in."

I handed him one of our regular water glasses. "Would you like ice in it?"

"Oh, I don't want it for drinking," he said. "I have a particular kind of colored pencil that you can use a bit like watercolor. You dip the point in water and paint with it like a brush. Or you paint with it dry and then put water on the surface afterward, depending on what effect you want." He grinned. "One of the teachers in art school used to lick the end of her pencil and paint with it."

I was fascinated. "I had no idea. It's sort of like having watercolors wrapped in wood, in the shape of a pencil, rather than the old metal box with hard blocks of color that we used to have in school."

"Yes," he said, "except that colored pencils give you more control." He took the glass and put an inch of water in it. "Basic paint consists of dry, powdered pigment. Then the pigment is mixed with water, or oil, or egg yolk. Colored pencils are made of pigments mixed with wax." He turned toward the hallway, then hesitated. "I don't like having people around when I'm working, but if you're interested, someday I'll show you how these pencils work."

"Thank you. I'd like that very much."



Another ten days slipped by. I found it hard to believe the calendar when it said we'd reached mid-May. But everyone at Holly Haven had been working hard, Jason on his paintings, Ben in his garden, Jody pulling weeds, and Maggie dosing Oliver every night to try and keep him quiet enough for her to get some sleep. Every day I'd trekked down to Norma's old house to help Betty Good and the Heritage Society get the place ready for the opening on the long May twenty-fourth weekend. The Carlson boys had done a fine job of painting and hanging wallpaper and Betty had found an ancient, battered desk and an even more battered filing cabinet to serve as office furniture for the tourist bureau section in the space that had been the front hall.

Except for one bitter phone harangue from Pamela, the Fieldings had been ominously silent. Ben thought they had given up, but I wasn't so sure. A week ago, I'd seen a strange car driving very slowly past Holly Haven twice in the space of five minutes. I kept telling myself it was probably just a tourist who'd lost his way, but I didn't believe it.

At breakfast, Jason let us see his completed drawing of Oliver.

I was stunned. "It's fantastic! Jason, it's just beautiful." I glanced up and saw that Jody wore a proud smile.

Jason grinned. "Wait till you see this one." He pulled a second drawing from behind his back and put it on the table. "Ta da! George the Magnificent, in all his glory."

I couldn't help it; I had tears in my eyes. "I'm speechless. I'm sorry, but I don't have any words good enough for that. He looks like he could just get up and walk out of the picture and



jump on my lap."

Ben made quite a show of pretending to sneeze so that he could blow his nose, but I knew I hadn't been the only one affected deeply by Jason's work. "We have to have that one," Ben said, putting away his handkerchief. "What's your price, Jason?"

"For you, free."

"No." Ben shook his head. "You cannot give your work away to people. I won't let you. I'm going to pay you for it."

Jason gave him a serious look. "Mr. Sutton. This is my art, my work. If I want to give it away, I can. And I will."

"Look," I said, "can you two argue that point later? What we need to do right this minute, Jason, is go to Mora Bay with these drawings and go to the Mora Bay Gallery. We also need to take Oliver's picture to the *Advocate*. Maggie is just barely managing with him. In spite of the Benadryl, he's wearing her down."

Ben shook his head again. "She should never have taken him on."

"But she did. And you know she's too stubborn to quit."

Jason was back to grinning, looking like a young boy who'd just found a new bike under the Christmas tree. "Can we have breakfast first?"

I made pancakes to celebrate Jason's paintings, with bacon on the side for Ben and me. And enough bacon, of course, for all the four-footed and furred members of the family as well, since they'd have been most indignant if they could smell bacon but weren't given any. We didn't hang around for coffee afterwards, either. The prospect of getting Jason launched, even in such a small place as Adriana Island, was exciting.

Ben went off to the garden. Jason and Jody came with me in the car, which I had to coax into life, and we set out for Mora Bay. I noticed that Jody had a white cane with her.

"I've never seen you use that cane before," I said.

"I only use it where there are lots of people around," she said. "It tells them I'm blind and to stay out of my way so I don't bump into them. It's useful for finding curbs, too."

Olivia was unlocking the door to her gallery when we parked in front. A tall woman with dyed red hair in a bun, with a black chopstick through it, on top of her head, she wore wildly colorful long skirts and shawls and many silver bangles. A refugee from a stress-filled life in the city, like so many of us on the island, she'd told me once that she had dressed for her city work in heels and sober suits and that she intended to spend the rest of her life making up for it. I felt the same way, but my rebelliousness had never taken me beyond jeans, runners, and my black and silver hair in a long braid.

"Well," she said, cocking her head to one side, "so this is the young man who draws." She eyed the large folder Jason was carrying. "Let me see what you have."

I introduced Jason and Jody, and we followed her into the store. I stood to one side with Jody while Olivia went through the drawings in Jason's makeshift portfolio. Her eyes were sparkling when she'd finished.

"These are awesome," she said, "and, believe me, I do not use that word lightly when it comes to art." She looked at Jason. "I'd like to take a dozen of these, frame them and hang them in the gallery."

"Can you take payment for the framing from and sales you make?" he asked. Jody had moved up beside him and they were holding hands.

"Yes, of course," Olivia said. "That's not an unusual arrangement."

"If you don't mind," I said, "I'll leave you two here to get things sorted out with Olivia while

I take the photograph of Oliver to the *Advocate*. I'll be back in half an hour or less."

It took me nearly an hour. My boss, Scott West, gave me another sheaf of haiku entries in the *Advocate's* poetry contest, reminding me that I had only four days to read them and make decisions for first, second and third prizes. We had decided to award the prizes on the long weekend and perhaps display the winning poems in the new museum. He exclaimed over the picture of Oliver and promised to put it in the *Looking for Love* column with a repeat of Maggie's ad for the next issue, which would be published two days hence. Then we discussed the current rumor of ferry fares to Vancouver Island being increased and, by the time I looked at my watch, it was almost noon.

Back at the art gallery, however, Jason and Olivia had just finished picking frames for his drawings and they were still happily talking about art.

Jason turned to me. "You weren't kidding about Cal doing wool art. There's one of his abstracts on the other side of that partition. He's really good."

"That fact still surprises me sometimes, too," I said. "But he's won prizes for his hangings at exhibitions. There's more to the man than just being a goat-handler and a Harley-wrangler." I shifted the strap of my bag to the other shoulder. "Would you mind if we stopped at the grocery store for a minute? I need to stock up on tinned cat food before I get fired as head cook. Or sued by the fur brigade because I'm starving them."

We drove down the hill and parked behind the store. The sky was overcast and threatening rain, but Jason's face was so bright that I fantasized it as a little bit of sunshine. I suggested to the kids that they could wait in the car, but they wanted to come with me and have a little look around. When we finished, Jason was just pushing the basket toward the door and the parking lot when Duff came hurrying from his office in the back of the store.

"Hi, Holly! I'm glad to see you." His glance strayed to Jason and Jody, and he gave them a friendly nod. "I have a couple of little items of business to discuss with you. How about lunch?"

His real reason for lunch, I knew, was curiosity about Jason and Jody. He'd met them when he tried to get them to leave Norma's house but now that they had been adopted by Ben and me, he wanted to know every single detail they might divulge. Going to lunch suited me because of the opportunity to promote Jason and his work. I suspected that Duff was nearly as much of a gossip as Cal. And I also wanted the satisfaction of proving to Duff that I wasn't crazy.

By the time we'd finished lunch and were walking out of the Yellow Duck, my guess about Duff had been proven right. He'd mentioned some correspondence for the trustees, but he'd spent most of the hour talking with Jody and Jason. When we reached the grocery store parking lot and my car, Duff stopped, too.

"I forgot to tell you, Holly," he said, beaming, "that cats are one of the oldest mammals on earth. African wild cats were found in fossils dated as early as thirty-eight million years ago."

"No wonder they think they're perfect," I said. "They've evolved so well they'll probably still be here when the human race is extinct."

"You're a pessimist," Duff said. "We're too smart to go extinct."

"We're not perfect, though," Jody said. "Did you know that your body uses three hundred muscles to balance itself when you're standing still?" There was a little smile on her face, and I remembered then that I'd told her about Duff's penchant for gathering what he called weird facts.

Duff looked down at his feet and actually almost stumbled. He put a hand on the roof of the car to steady himself. "I'm glad those muscles work automatically." His smile was rueful. "I'd never remember how to coordinate that many."

I had to give him points for being gracious after Jody one-upping him. "We'll see you on the

weekend, at the museum opening."

"Certainly will," Duff said, "and Holly, what..." He paused, then said, "Never mind. I had a question, but I think you're the wrong person to ask." He raised a hand in farewell and hurried away toward the store.

"I wonder what that was about," I murmured. "Duff is way too organized not to know exactly what he's saying to which person." As we drove back across the hills to Holly Haven along blossom-lined roads, I mulled that over, along with Ben's mysterious phone call. By the time we got out of the car to Nicky's tempestuous greeting, I could make a pretty good guess at what was going on.



About three that afternoon, I happened to look out the kitchen window just as a silver-gray Mercedes pulled into our driveway and stopped. My curiosity went into overdrive; I'd never seen that car before. Then a middle-aged couple got out and my curiosity was augmented by apprehension. Could these people be Jody's parents? The two who had harassed me by telephone?

They walked toward the back door. The man was good-looking, with brown hair in a conventional cut. He wore a navy pullover with a pale blue shirt and navy tie. His gray trousers had knife-edge creases and his shoes shone. The woman had smooth, short blonde hair and wore a tailored lilac pant suit and earrings that flashed in the sunlight. Diamonds, maybe?

Then they were knocking at the door.

When I opened the back door, I could see that they both had blue eyes and were somewhat past middle-aged, perhaps in their fifties. They were well-preserved and well-groomed, as befitted people who could afford a Mercedes.

"I'm Parker Fielding," the man said, "and this is my wife, Pamela. We're Jody's parents. May we come in?"

I stepped back and opened the door wider. "Of course. I'm Holly Sutton."

They followed me through the mud room, which was living up to its name, and into the kitchen. I was about to invite them through to the living room when Parker said, "Let's sit around this table. It seems an appropriate place to discuss what we came for."

He yanked a chair back and frowned when he found the seat occupied by George the Magnificent. Parker tipped the chair forward, dumping George on the floor. My little tabby king glared at this dapper creature who had treated him so disrespectfully and ventured close enough to sniff Parker's ankles.

When I saw Parker lift one foot, I raised my hand. "Mr. Fielding, if you're thinking of kicking that cat, please don't." I wanted to tell him that if he did, I'd kick his butt clear to the road, but I managed to hold my tongue.

Parker looked surprised, then shrugged. We sat down and George marched into the living room, tail switching back and forth. I had already prepared the coffeemaker for Ben's and my usual afternoon break, and I could have offered this pair a coffee, but I didn't see why I should.

"We decided to make a personal visit," Parker said, "when you appeared to dismiss our telephone calls as irrelevant. Perhaps you will listen to us this time."

Pamela leaned forward, her dyed blonde hair swinging forward. "You don't seem to understand the seriousness of my daughter being drugged and kept against her will by a criminal." She leaned back again. "Jody has never accepted the fact that she is blind and

therefore disabled. She is still trying to act like a normal person. She needs to be properly taken care of and she definitely needs counseling or psychiatric care."

"And as soon as we have her back in our home," Parker said, "we'll make sure that she gets that care."

I was really glad I hadn't offered them coffee. "I disagree with you on a number of points. First, Jody seems like a perfectly normal young woman to me, and she is quite adept at taking care of herself. In my opinion, she's mature for her age and has a good grasp of reality. Second, Jason is not drugging her, and he is certainly not keeping her against her will. You apparently haven't noticed, but they're in love with each other."

Pamela gave me a pitying look. "I don't know whether you're familiar with this saying, but it certainly applies to you. 'There are none so blind as those who will not see.'"

"I think it applies just as aptly to you two," I said. "Let me ask you this. You're a lot older than Jody. What happens to her when you die?"

Parker blinked. "That's not going to happen for a good many years and, by the time it does, Jody will have accepted her limitations and will be content with a somewhat restricted life."

"She will have to live in a home of some kind," Pamela said, "where she can be supervised. We will make sure it is a good one."

"In case you're wondering," Parker added, "there will be plenty of money to provide her with everything she needs. We both inherited money and we have a thriving business in Vancouver." He shook his head. "I don't understand why you're so suspicious and stubborn. We are Jody's parents, and we love her. We're only trying to do what is right for her."

"I'm sure you believe that," I said, "but I don't understand why you are convinced that she can't look after herself. She's an adult. She's entitled to make her own decisions about her life."

Pamela twisted her hands together. "But it's so obvious! She's blind. And she allowed that evil young man to introduce her to drugs and a filthy life on the street."

If they hadn't irritated me so much, I might have felt sorry for the Fieldings. I could see that they genuinely cared for Jody and were worried about her future. Why couldn't they give her the gift of freedom and respect her as the fully competent person she was? Perhaps they felt so guilty over the infection that had taken her sight they couldn't feel anything except a need to assuage that guilt.

Parker rose. "We'd like to see Jody, if you don't mind. Is she here?"

I was glad I didn't have to lie. "No, she's not. Neither of them is here." As soon as we'd returned from Mora Bay, they said they were going down to the beach to explore and perhaps take more pictures. "She's told me several times that she doesn't want to speak to you, and I intend to respect her wishes."

Pamela rose and Parker snorted. "If that's your attitude, we may as well leave," he said. As they walked out the back door, he turned to glare at me. "You haven't seen the last of us."

They were backing out of the driveway when Ben came in, looking for coffee and cookies. "Who was that?" he asked.

"Jody's parents," I said wearily. "Two of the most misguided people I have ever had the misfortune to meet. Not only that, they insulted George the Magnificent."



## Chapter VII -- Arrest

I picked up the phone and called Maggie. "Come on over and have coffee with me." Ben and I had just finished breakfast and he'd gone to the greenhouse with Jody to harvest a truckload of vegetables to take to Mora Bay. Jason was upstairs, working on more drawings.

"I shouldn't really leave the cats," she said.

"Give yourself a break," I said. "They'll get on fine without you for an hour and I know darn well you need a rest from all the caterwauling."

She came in the back door five minutes later. She still looked exhausted.

"Isn't that Benadryl helping at all?"

"Yes, it is," she said, collapsing into a chair at the kitchen table. "Sir Oliver does usually sleep through the night now, which means I get my sleep, too. But it's a broken, restless sleep because I feel so awful keeping him locked up when he wants to be a wild, wild cat out there stalking birds and butterflies. I hate to admit it, Holly, but I'm just about ready to give up."

How could I blame her? I hated making cats unhappy, too. I even had a rough time giving them medication because there was no way to make them understand that the invasive and unpleasant procedure would help them feel better. "We could take him back to the SPCA tomorrow. Otherwise, it'll have to wait until Tuesday because of the long weekend."

Maggie thought about it while she provided a lap and a two-handed pet to George the Magnificent, who had come dashing in through the cat door when he saw her, knowing she would pay him the attention to which he felt entitled. "We could even take him back today. But I don't know what to do."

I put a plate of ginger snaps on the table. "Then let me bring you up to date on the dramas happening in this house while you think about it. Jody's parents showed up in person two days ago and spent half an hour telling me the same things they had already said a dozen times on the phone."

"I wondered who that Mercedes belonged to," Maggie said. "Were Jody and Jason there? Was there a confrontation?"

"No, luckily the kids had gone down to the beach. They were pretty upset when I told them. They apologized for the fact her parents were hassling me. I said I didn't mind because being heckled when I was making speeches as a political candidate had toughened me up considerably. But they were just as upset for themselves. Jody looked positively haunted all day yesterday. They feel they can't go anywhere without being hounded and they were doing some muttering last night about moving to Montreal."

"If they mean it, I'll give them travel money," Maggie said. "I think it's awful what her parents are doing."

"I don't think you'll need to do anything. This morning they both seemed to have regained their Buddhist attitudes and are taking the day a moment at a time."

"But it must wear on them just like Sir Oliver wears on me," Maggie said, as she reached for another cookie. "These cookies have a real bite. They're delicious."

"The reason for the bite is that my hand slipped when I was putting in the ground ginger, so they ended up with twice as much as usual."

Maggie took a mouthful of cookie and chewed thoughtfully. "I think you should do them that way all the time."

"Ben agrees with you," I said.

"What did Benjamin have to say about the Fieldings?"

"You know he learned how to swear when he was in the Navy. He can be very eloquent when he puts his mind to it." I got up to pour a second coffee. "He said if they came back again, he'd throw them off the property, but I don't know if he can do that legally."

"Do you care if it's legal or not?"

"Frankly, no." The phone rang and I put my coffee mug down. It was Joanna Karl, the trustee who lived on Melfort Island. "What's up, Joanna?" I hoped she wasn't phoning about business. I wanted to get down to Brentwood Park and help Betty. There was still a lot of work to do, and the official opening of the park, museum and tourist bureau was all too soon, at ten o'clock Saturday morning.

"Holly, you know what goes on at the *Advocate*. Who writes that column *Looking For Love* about cats looking for homes? I'm sure you told me, but I can't remember."

"My mother-in-law, who happens to be sitting at my kitchen table right now." Maggie looked up from her coffee and raised her eyebrows. I waved my hand, signaling her to wait.

"Do you know anything about this cat called Sir Oliver?"

"I know quite a lot about him," I said, crossing my fingers. "Maggie is fostering him so that the SPCA wouldn't have to put him down."

"Then I'm glad I called you," Joanna said. "My friends, Norm and Kris, just came over from Riggby Island and they were in the general store, stocking up on grub, and saw the *Advocate*. Their old cat just died and they're looking for a replacement."

"Riggby Island? Is that the hunk of rock about a quarter mile east of Melfort?"

"Holly," said Joanna patiently, "it is not a hunk of rock. It's sixty acres of what you might call pristine wilderness, except for my friends' house and outbuildings."

"You mean nobody else lives on the island?" This was sounding simply too good to be true.

"That's right. Norm's family settled on the island about a hundred and fifty years ago. He's a fisherman. They've always been a fishing family."

"Joanna, they sound absolutely perfect. When do they want to come and meet Sir Oliver? Soon, I hope. Maggie's had to keep him sequestered in one room because of her other cats and he's dying to get outside."

"And he's expressing himself forcefully, am I right?" Joanna said, a smile in her voice.

"You could say that, yes."

"Norm and Kris will be going to Adriana for the opening of the park, and for the dance that night, too. I'll give them your phone number and tell them where you live. I'm sure they'll be in touch Sunday afternoon. That's when they're planning to go home."

"Joanna, that's wonderful. Maggie will be so relieved."

When I told Maggie that Oliver might have a new home, she blinked tears from her eyes. "What luck!" she finally said. "And especially living on a little island. If there are no other cats, Oliver can be king of the whole thing and never have to fight about it. That's the best gift anyone could give him."

"I know. And you can have your life back."

She nodded. "Ben will have to come and fix that bedroom door." She finished her coffee and rose, looking rather subdued again.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I'd better not count on these people from Riggby," she said, "in case it falls through." Then she was smiling again. "But just the same, I'm going home to tell Sir Oliver about his good luck. And I'll tell him to have patience; all things come to those who complain hard enough!"



It seemed to be an established weather pattern on the west coast for rain to pour down on long weekends, just when people wanted to go outside and play. Therefore, I was not surprised when I woke Saturday morning to ominous dark-gray clouds.

"What do you think, Ben?" I asked, when he came in from feeding and watering the chickens. "Is it going to rain or just threaten?"

"Ask George. He knows as much about the weather as anybody."

George was paying no attention to the weather. He paced back and forth in the kitchen, his nose twitching to the aroma of frying bacon and his tail waving like a flag. The other five felines were sitting down but obviously on red alert, ready to surge forward the minute plates were brought to the table.

I sighed. "I hope it doesn't rain. People will get soaked listening to the mayor's speech and then they'll track mud all through the museum."

"Isn't that what vacuum cleaners are for?" Ben was setting the table, hampered by Nicky, who seemed to think that the closer he stayed to his pack leader, the more treats he would get.

Jason and Jody walked into the kitchen. "I'll finish the table," Jason said. Jody sat down on my right.

"Can I talk you into revealing whether my poem was a winner?" she asked.

I reached over and patted her hand. "No way! Scott will announce that right after the mayor cuts the ribbon."

She grinned. "Oh, well, it was worth a try. Are those people from the little island coming tomorrow to see Oliver? Have you heard from them?"

"No." I said, "I'm sure they haven't even left Riggby yet."

"I'm glad my photo got somebody interested in him," Jason said, as he brought plates of eggs and toast to the table for Jody and himself.

"And that also helped Maggie a lot," I said. "She's been visiting Oliver every morning and telling him about his new home. You can believe this or not, but it seems to have calmed him down. He can't understand her words, of course, but maybe he can sense the excitement in her voice and knows that something good is going to happen."

Ben scowled. He'd been over to inspect the clawed bedroom door and was not amused. The word 'budget' had often been in his speech the last couple of days. "You mean he's stopped yowling and scratching?"

"No, but he's only doing it about half as much."

"Oh, good," Ben grumbled. "What time do you want to leave here?"

"Nine is okay. I want to be there a little early because the trustees are supposed to be on hand to take a bow for securing the Brentwood property as park."

"It'll take us less than half an hour to get there," Ben said. "So that means waiting another half hour at least before the mayor does her thing and cuts the ribbon."

"We'll take umbrellas for all of us," I said.

"Ben," said Jody, "why don't I fill a thermos with coffee? And take some of the oatmeal cookies Jason and I made yesterday? We can sit in the car and have a second breakfast. Would that help?"

He brightened at once and slipped Nicky another piece of bacon. "That would be very nice, Jody. Thank you."

I gave Jody an admiring glance. She was already using psychology to good effect.

Ben's worries, and mine, turned out to be all for nothing. By the time we got to Brentwood Park, the sun was shining, and the sky was clear. Not many people had arrived by nine-thirty, but cars were parking on both sides of the road that skirted the park and the spaces were filling up fast. Ben and the kids stayed in the car for a few minutes and had their second breakfast, while I went off looking for Duff and Joanna. A few minutes later I saw Ben in a serious conversation with Mitch from the Yellow Duck. I added that fact to my growing list of little mysteries that all pointed to one conclusion and decided that I really would have to talk to Maggie about it later and confirm my suspicions.

At ten o'clock, the mayor of Mora Bay, a tall, blonde, blue-eyed physiotherapist, stepped up to the yellow ribbon tied across the veranda steps, barring entrance to the museum, and rang a bell for attention. "Good morning, everyone," she said, "and thanks for coming to celebrate the opening of Brentwood Park, the Adriana Island Museum and the Adriana Tourist Bureau." I was afraid she might be as long-winded as her predecessor, but she wasn't. She thanked the trustees, the Adriana Heritage Society, and several other people and then, to my delight, she cut the yellow ribbon.

After the applause died down, Scott West climbed halfway up the veranda steps to announce the winners of the *Advocate's* haiku contest. "I'm happy to say a lot of people entered the contest and we're going to display the top twenty poems on a bulletin board in the tourist office." He glanced down at the sheaf of papers in his hand. "Okay, let's get started. The third prize of five dollars goes to Dotty Taylor, a fourteen-year-old student at Mora Bay High."

Off to my right, a girl with bright red hair and freckles bounced up and down.

"Dotty wrote a two-verse haiku, which is not usual, but I like it a lot. Here we go."

*Wet leaf clings tight to my boot,  
shunning the mud path,  
seeking a winter haven.  
I'll put it on my bookshelf,  
see if it takes to  
hanging around all those words.*

After the applause, Scott said, "And second prize of ten dollars goes to Jody Winter."

Jody and Jason were on the other side of the steps. Jason raised her hand high in the air. Her smile expressed pure delight. Scott read her haiku.

*Small bathroom spider  
weaves a web in the window,  
netting a world view.*

The first prize of twenty-five dollars went to Shelly Norton, the Mora Bay bookkeeper who had adopted two of Ming and Kaylie's kittens. She waved at everyone, and I reminded myself to speak to her afterward and see how Lucretia and Sabina were doing.

Scott read her haiku.

*Sleek black cheeky cat  
eyes my fresh salmon sandwich,  
sends a paw fishing.*

We all applauded, and Scott said, "Okay, folks, I'll get out of your way so you can go have a look at the many wonders the Heritage Society has accomplished with Norma Brentwood's old home."

I went over to Jody and, for the first time, she offered her open arms for a hug. Her thin body felt delicate and breakable, like bird bones. "I'm glad you won second prize. It wasn't easy



to choose between yours and the one that got first prize. Where did you come up with the idea?"

She laughed. "Jason told me that a small spider had built its web in the upstairs bathroom window."

"Oh dear, is it still there? I'm not the best housekeeper in the world, but the cats usually take care of moths and spiders."

"We decided to leave it alone," Jody said. "The spider isn't doing any harm."

"Well, if you don't mind him being there, I don't either. Or maybe it's a 'her.' Are you going through the museum?"

"Yes," Jason said. "I'd like to see what's been done to the house since we were here."

I followed them in and the first person we met was Betty Good. I introduced her to Jason and Jody and Betty put a hand on Jody's arm. "We have ropes up to protect the furniture and area carpets," she said, "so you won't be able to see it properly. If you come back on a day when I'm working and it isn't busy, I'll take you through and unhook the ropes so you can go in and examine the furniture. And of course I'll also tell you where the furniture was made and in what year."

Jody thanked Betty, then she and Jason moved on. I could hear him describing the layout of the living room to her. "That was nice of you," I said to Betty, though I knew she liked nothing better than talking about antiques and local history.

She waved away the compliment. "They seem very pleasant young people." She smiled. "Exactly as you described them."

I'd seen more than enough of the museum in the past few weeks, so I sat on the old wooden porch swing Betty had rescued from a friend's basement and placed on the veranda, and enjoyed just watching the crowd drift in and out and around the grounds. It still seemed strange to have Norma's vegetable garden gone, replaced with lawn and a few small flower beds, and I indulged in a few moments of nostalgia, remembering our friendship and all the conversations and coffees and cat-petting we'd indulged in on this veranda.

Half an hour later Ben found me there and, just as he was suggesting a hamburger at the Yellow Duck, Jody and Jason came out. Close on their heels were Maggie and Cal, who had arrived on the Harley shortly after we did. The six of us headed for Mora Bay, this time with Maggie in the back seat beside Jody, and Jason on the back of the Harley. While we were enjoying our hamburgers and beer, he couldn't stop talking about how much fun it was and Cal promised to take Jody on the way back to Holly Haven. We ended up on the deck of the Yellow Duck, enjoying the sunshine and the sounds of water slapping around the pilings underneath. I leaned back in my chair and breathed a sigh of contentment. All in all, it had been a perfect day.

The next day was Sunday and, in the afternoon, a battered, rust-speckled pickup, almost as old as Bouncing Blue Betsy and typical of island trucks, came rattling down our driveway. The man who got out was big and rough-looking and I crossed my fingers that he wasn't the type to be rough with Oliver. Particularly as Oliver had a mind of his own and might be rough in retaliation. The woman was slim, and her skin was as browned as her husband's, but she was toting a cat carrier, so it didn't seem likely that they were just looking.

I went out to meet them and they introduced themselves as Norm and Kris. We walked over to Maggie's and did more introductions.

"Let me put my other cats out in the pen," she said, "so that they won't get in the way or raise a fuss if Oliver happens to escape from the bedroom."

Once that was done, we went into the spare bedroom and closed the door. Oliver was curled up in the waste basket again, but he didn't seem to mind losing his status as a basket cat when

Norm picked him up and began petting him. My last worry about Oliver vanished as Norm handled the cat with those big work-roughened hands as if he were a precious ornament and started murmuring, "You're a splendid little fella." He looked at Maggie and said, "So how come his first owners didn't want to keep him? He's a handsome boy."

Maggie explained what he'd done to Arlene and why and, for a moment, looking at Norm's frown, I wondered if that story would be a deal-breaker.

It wasn't. Norm smiled at Sir Oliver and said, "You'll be fine on Riggby, little fella."

"There are no other cats?" I asked.

Kris shook her head. "There are some raccoons," she said, "but we've always made sure to get neutered cats. They're less combative."

"Open the carrier, Kris," Norm said. "Let's get this boy home and get him used to our house for a couple days before we let him out to explore his territory." He smiled at me. "I don't count mice as wildlife. I count them as pests."

The couple carried Oliver to the truck and settled the carrier between them. We waved as they went out the driveway, headed for Mora Bay, where their boat was tied up. I noticed Maggie had tears in her eyes.

"What?" I said.

"I'm going to miss him," she said, blowing her nose.

"Honestly! After all he's put you through?"

"He didn't mean to put me through anything," Maggie said, "and he is a beautiful little personality."

"With sharp claws and a strong sense of entitlement," I said. "Aren't they all? Let's go let the legal residents out of the pen."

The four came in at once, led by Doran. Whether they had seen or smelled Oliver going away from the house, I didn't know, but they made a beeline from the cat door to the spare bedroom and spent the next hour sniffing all over it. When Maggie and I had cleared out the litter box, food dishes, and my carrier, they were still sniffing. Doran had knocked over the wicker waste basket in his attempt to get to the very essence of Oliver's scent.

"I'm sad that he's gone," Maggie said, "but yes, it is a relief to have things back to normal."

"Maybe Doran will take over the position of basket cat," I said.

"He can do as he likes," said Maggie. "Whatever he does, I'm through being a basket case."

"No more fostering?" I teased.

Maggie shook her head. "I never say never. That was worth it just so Oliver could get his very own island to play on."

We went into the kitchen area and Maggie made coffee. While she was getting out mugs and cookies, I fed Shaz a couple of grapes, and she permitted me to stroke her cloud-soft fur.

"Maggie," I said, when she had poured the coffee and sat down opposite me, "what's Ben up to with the secret phone calls and conferences with Mitch from the Yellow Duck?"

"I'm not allowed to tell you," she said. "Ben wants it to be a secret."

"Ben couldn't keep a secret if his life depended on it; he always looks terribly guilty if he has one. And there's only one thing I can think of that he'd want to keep secret."

Maggie smiled. "If you tell me what you suspect, I'll tell you if you're right or wrong. Since this secret is centered around you, I do think you should have some say in it, but I promised Ben I wouldn't tell, so I can't."

"Here's my guess. He's dreaming up some sort of surprise party for my sixtieth birthday this summer."

"You're absolutely right."

"Ah!" I leaned back in my chair. "All right, now that I know what the furtive phone calls are about, I can pretend I'm deaf. Is he planning a big party at the Yellow Duck?"

Maggie nodded. "I told him he should check with you that you wanted a party, but he said that would spoil the surprise."

"He must have forgotten the party I threw for his sixtieth last year. He kept insisting that he didn't want a party and that he wouldn't come to it. He nearly drove me crazy."

"I remember that," Maggie said. "But he did arrive, eventually, and seemed to enjoy himself."

"I think that was because he decided to count his age in cat-years, which made him only eleven. I don't remember whether he thought that up, or whether Duff did, but it worked."

Maggie rose and refilled our mugs. "According to what I read in magazines, sixty is the new forty. So it's not as if you're facing a seniors' home any time soon."

"Oh, I'm not concerned about my age. It's just a number. It doesn't say much, if anything, about my thinking or my energy or my capabilities." I glanced at the plate of chocolate chip cookies and resisted. "But you know what; I think I'm going to start torturing Ben."

Maggie gave me an enquiring look.

"The latest fad is having a bucket list. I'll start telling Ben that I have one, and that I want to do at least one thing on that list for my sixtieth."

"Holly, you are wicked."

"Oh, I'll be gentle. I won't actually start booking a flight to Rio so I can paddle a thousand miles up the Amazon. But I might talk about it a bit, ask him what he thinks, do a little obvious research about South America. And whatever else I can think of."

Maggie laughed. "I still think you're wicked. But that will be fun. As long as you don't tell Ben I blabbed, I won't tell him you're pulling his leg. In fact, I may commiserate with him because you're being so uncooperative."

I reached across the table and shook her hand. "Deal!"



I wanted so badly for Jason to be successful, I felt almost as anxious as he did about whether the gallery would be able to sell any of his drawings. So, some ten days later, when Olivia phoned on Tuesday morning of the first week in June, and told me she'd sold six of them, I let out a whoop that made Ming and Kaylie jump, and caused George to give me a dirty look and stalk away to bestow his presence on someone who would show him proper respect. I rushed to the foot of the stairs and shouted, "Jason! Come and talk to Olivia! She's sold six of your paintings!"

If the stairway had been fitted with a decent wood banister instead of a metal railing, I'm sure he'd have slid down. He dashed to the phone, with Jody only a few steps behind, an eager look on her face. Jody and I hovered until he hung up.

He turned to us, eyes sparkling, face alight. "Fantastic! She did, she sold six of my pieces. And she thinks a couple of people will be back for another look. Woo! This calls for a major celebration!" He picked Jody up and twirled her around while she laughed in delight. Then he hugged me. "So, what shall we do? Start a bonfire? Send up a rocket?"

"Go to lunch at the Yellow Duck?" I suggested.

"Oh," said Jason, "much wilder than that! Let's go back upstairs and make plans, Jody."

They went upstairs and, not willing to wait until noon to share the news with Ben, I went out to the greenhouse and told him. He was delighted, as I knew he would be. Still grinning, he squared his shoulders and intoned, "'I came, I saw, I conquered.' Julius Caesar, born 100 BC, died 44 BC."

"How many of those quotes have you memorized?" I asked.

Ben took a paper out of his shirt pocket and waved it at me. "Dozens. Or at least I'm trying to memorize them. Every time I stop for a minute's breather, I read the list again."

As I walked back to the house, two cars bumped across the cattle guard at the gate and rolled down the driveway. One was the Fieldings' Mercedes. The other was a police cruiser. The horrible feeling in the pit of my stomach intensified as both Fieldings emerged, then two police officers, one male, one female. Had they come to take Jody away? But they couldn't, I protested silently. They had no right!

The Fieldings stood by their car, glowering, as the police officers identified themselves, said they were from Victoria, and asked my name. The male officer said, "Do you have a Jody Fielding and Jason Winter living with you?"

When I said yes, he went on. "We have a warrant for Mr. Winter's arrest. Can you tell us where we might find him?"

"I don't want to, but I will," I said. "Come into the house and I'll show you to the stairs. He and Jody are up in their room."

They followed me, the Fieldings close behind, through the kitchen and into the hallway. I pointed at the foot of the stairs. "Up there."

The Fieldings tried to push past me, and I blocked them. "You're not welcome in my house. But if you intend to hang around, gloating, you can wait in the kitchen."

They didn't argue but turned and headed for the kitchen table. Parker pulled out a chair and, to my surprise, it was the one George the Magnificent had decided to use for a nap. Again.

Parker dumped George on the floor and said, "Why don't you train your animals to sleep on the floor, where they belong?"

His fur ruffled and his tail switching, George hissed at Parker.

"I don't see why you're objecting," I said. "Surely Pamela doesn't make you sleep on the floor, does she?"

He and Pamela both glared at me. Upstairs, Jody screamed. I wanted to go and comfort her, but the policewoman would make sure she was all right. I'd do nobody any good by interfering.

The policeman came down the hall with Jason, just as Ben came in from outside, asking, "What's going on?"

I explained. Ben's face paled and he looked at Jason. "What can we do to help?"

"Look after Jody," Jason said. He, too, was pale, but seemed calm. "This is all one big mistake. They've arrested me for drug dealing, which is something I've never done, and nobody can prove that I have."

The policeman and Jason went out the back door and I watched them get into the cruiser. I could hear Jody crying. After a moment or two, she quieted, and the policewoman came downstairs.

Parker Fielding rose. "Can we go upstairs and get her? We'll take her home where she can be looked after properly."

The policewoman said, "No, Mr. Fielding, you may not. I told Miss Fielding that you were here and that you wanted to take her home and she refused to see you or speak to you. She made it clear that if she couldn't accompany Mr. Winter to Victoria, she wanted to stay here."

"But she's not competent to make a decision like that," Parker snapped. "She's hysterical and no doubt drugged."

"Mr. Fielding," said the policewoman, with a warning note in her voice. "I've dealt with many hysterical people, and your daughter is not one of them. She is also an adult and therefore entitled to make her own decisions." She looked at Ben and me. "Are you willing to have her stay with you?"

"Absolutely!" Ben and I exclaimed together. "She can stay as long as she likes," I added.

Parker's face was red as he went on glaring at Ben and me. "You haven't heard the last of this. You're colluding with that criminal and putting my daughter at risk."

Ben took a step forward. "Get out of my house!"

"You can't throw me out!" Parker blustered.

"Yes, he can," the policewoman said. "I'd suggest you get in your car and leave, Mr. Fielding. Go home and calm down. It may take longer than you like, but things will sort themselves out."

Ben and I watched through the kitchen window as both cars backed out of the driveway and disappeared down the road. He turned to me. "I know this isn't funny, but it's apt. Tacitus, who lived from 55 to 117 AD, said, 'It is human nature to hate him whom you have injured.'"

"You think the Fieldings have injured Jason?"

"Yes," Ben said, "I do. I wouldn't be surprised if they had something to do with his arrest." He turned. "Let's go upstairs and tell Jody we're on her side."

"She knows that," I said, "but I think she could use a lot of comfort right about now."

Jody was lying on her bed, clutching a wet tissue. I sat down on the edge of the bed and took her hand. "We'll do whatever we can for Jason."

"Yes," Ben said, "and you can stay here forever if you want."

She actually produced a faint smile. "I don't think it'll be that long." She sat up. "It's really awful the way things go sometimes. Only twenty minutes ago we were so happy and planning all kinds of good things. And now look what's happened. I know my parents had something to do with it. They'd do anything for the chance to run my life again." She lay back down. "I hope they burn in hell."

"I think they already are," I said.

"Then I wish they wouldn't try to drag me there with them."

I stood up. Ming was standing in the doorway. As soon as I moved away from the bed, he jumped up on it and nosed Jody's hand. When she stroked him, he cuddled up against her. His purr was strong and steady.

"Are you going to be okay?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "I just want to lie here for a while and breathe. And Ming will help me." She closed her eyes.

"I'll call you when lunch is ready," I said.

Downstairs, Ben put his boots back on. "She's pretty strong for such a frail little thing."

"She's had to be strong," I said. "With parents like she's got, you either fight or go under."

"I'm going to think about how to help Jason," Ben said, "while I pull some weeds and hill some potatoes."

"No more quotes from famous Romans?"

"'Let the punishment match the offense.' Cicero, 106 to 43 BC."

"But Jason hasn't offended," I protested.

"Then he won't be punished, and he'll be home soon. But," said Ben as he turned to the back

door, "the Fieldings have offended in many ways. I might give some thought to appropriate punishment for them while I yank weeds out."



## Chapter VIII -- Release

Jody came downstairs for lunch, with Ming catting her heels. "He knows I'm upset. That's amazing."

"Cats are sensitive to people's emotions," I said. "So, yes, he does know you are unhappy, and he's been trying to purr you better."

She sat at the table and reached down to pet Ming. "He helps a lot, but I won't really be okay until Jason comes back."

Ben put bowls of carrot and ginger soup on the table along with a plate of crackers and wedges of Cheddar cheese. As he sat down, he said, "I think we should phone Robert Geraghty."

"That's a wonderful idea!" I exclaimed.

"Who's he?" Jody asked.

"He's the lawyer The Islands Trust uses when they need one. He represented Norma Brentwood and the trustees when we were fighting to keep Norma's hundred and sixty acres as parkland, rather than have it go to her greedy son. Robert did a good job for us."

"Jason and I can't afford a lawyer."

"Don't worry about it," Ben said. "Jason may not even need a lawyer. But, at the moment, he does need somebody in Victoria who will be on his side until this mess gets sorted out. And if there's a bill for legal fees, we'll pay it."

"But then we'll owe you."

"Yes, you will," Ben agreed, "but Jason's going to make it as an artist. He can pay me back someday."

I often teased Ben about his love of budgets and applying cost accounting principles to everything in our lives, including the cats' care, but when life handed him a challenge he always came through handsomely.

Jody sighed. "Okay. I want to say no, but I also want Jason free as soon as possible. What's this Robert Geraghty like?"

"He's well over six feet and thin, with gray hair, and wears gray suits. He looks humorless and very conservative, but he's not. He's not only brilliant, but he has a dry sense of humor." I reached for a cracker. "He told me the conservative look was a kind of uniform."

"He didn't carry through on that image with his vehicle, though," Ben said. "When we met him last year, he was driving a Smart Car. I found it incongruous that an elegant, dignified man like Robert would fold himself into something that cute."

"It's hardly even a car," I said. "Just a motorcycle with a lid."

"Oh, now, Holly," Ben said, "it works very well, so I'm told."

I shrugged. "I guess so and I'm sure it works better than my Chevy, but every time I see one, I think that if you added skinny legs and wings, it would look like a bumble bee." I pushed the plate of crackers and cheese close to Jody, just touching her hand with the rim. "Ming loves cheese."

She promptly took a piece and broke it into small bits and fed them, one by one, to Ming. When she finished, she said, "Is there anything I can help with this afternoon? I feel so useless sitting around and maybe it would help keep my mind off Jason."

"There certainly is," said Ben. "You already know how to do the weeding in the greenhouse, but I just finished that, so we can work together on weeding the vegetable garden. I'll give you a pair of foam kneepads and a trowel and you can work on one row while I work on the next."

Jody said to me. "Do you ever help with weeding?"

Ben laughed. "No way! I don't let her near the garden or the greenhouse. She's death on plants."

"Is that true?" she asked me.

"I'm afraid so," I said. "I have a very black thumb."

"I hope I don't," she said. "Is the sun shining?"

"Yes," Ben said, "it's a beautiful day out there."

"That's good," Jody said. "I like to feel the sun beating down on me, keeping me warm."

"You need to eat more," Ben said. "You don't have enough flesh on those bones to keep you warm. Let's go get started." He rose and headed for the mud room. Jody was right behind him. Ben turned to me. "Will you phone Geraghty?"

I promised I would and began clearing the table. Ming started to follow Jody, then remembered there were dangerous birds outside who might attack him. He poked his head out the cat door, then came back. "It's okay," I said, "Ben will look after her." I didn't know whether he understood me, but he seemed to. He went into the living room and curled up on the couch with Kaylie.

Robert wasn't available when I phoned, but his secretary said he'd call back as soon as he could. I breathed a sigh of relief. He could so easily have been on a big case that would keep him busy for weeks. Or on vacation.

He didn't call back until nearly three, but we had a pleasant conversation for a couple of minutes about Brentwood Park being officially open. Then he asked me how he could help. I explained in detail what I knew of Jason and Jody and why they were living with us. "Jason said, when they took him away, that he was charged with dealing in illicit drugs, but I think it's a trumped-up charge."

"Um," he said cautiously. "What makes you think so? Life on the street is tough and he might have got into that just so he could buy food."

"We had a discussion about drugs a few weeks ago and he said he had never had anything to do with drugs, other than a little personal experimentation. And I believe him, Robert. I would swear that he's told me the truth and that Jody has as well. He thinks, and so do I, that her parents are somehow behind this charge."

"Um," Robert said again. "Can you give me the names of the officers who arrested him? And anything you know about the parents?"

I did so, and answered a few more questions after that. "As for legal fees," I said, "Ben and I will be responsible for paying those."

Robert chuckled. "If Ben Sutton has agreed to part with his money that easily, he obviously has complete faith in your two boarders."

I laughed. "Ben's reputation seems to have reached far beyond just Adriana Island. But I believe in those kids, too."

"All right," he said. "I'll find out where they're keeping Jason and go have a word or two. And I'll see what I can find out about where the charges originated and what proof the authorities have. I'll get back to you when I know something."

"Thank you," I said. "I really appreciate it. The kids will appreciate it, too, and so will all the people who love Jason's drawings. He's a great artist."

"I'm afraid that something I know little about," Robert said.

"You don't have to know anything about art to appreciate Jason's work. It's representational. In other words, realistic. He did a drawing of one of Ben's tomatoes that looks so real you'd



swear you could pick it off the paper and eat it."

We ended the conversation, and I brewed the usual pot of coffee and put out a plate of sugar cookies for the three-thirty break. Ben and Jody came in and told me how well the weeding was going. I reported on my conversation with Robert Geraghty.

Jody heaved a sigh of relief. "I'm glad you're doing this," she said. "Jason will feel a lot better knowing he will have help defending himself. I know I do." Then she sighed again. "I wish I could be there for him."

"It's hard waiting, isn't it?" I said. "Let's see what Robert has to say. If Jason isn't going to be released in the next couple of days, I could drive you to Victoria so you could visit him. Do you have friends there you could stay with?"

Jody nodded. "I could take one of the foam mattresses and bunk on the floor at the place where Sonam and Pema live." She took another cookie and tried to give a bite to Ming, who'd deserted Kaylie again when he heard Jody's voice, but he rejected sugar cookies as something weird that only humans would eat. "It would be nice to see them and maybe Sonam would give me some of the hot pickles she makes."

"I didn't know you liked hot food," I said.

"I never ate it until we met Sonam and Pema. They are Tibetans who came here from India a couple of years ago. They grew up in the Tibetan community in Dharamsala in northern India, so they learned how to make Indian food. Some things they like are too hot for me, but I do love the pickles."

"Is it curry that makes them hot?" Ben asked. He was not adventurous about food, and I was sure that hot pickles were not on his bucket list.

"No," Jody said, "they use hot peppers. Jason and I tried to find hot mango pickles in the grocery store when we came here, but they didn't have any."

"We could check the internet for recipes," I said. "I liked the food in the Indian restaurants I went to in Victoria, but I never got beyond what they called mild heat."

I could see that Jody liked the idea of making something different and I thought it would be a way of distracting her. But Ben had his own ideas about distracting her and five minutes later they headed out to the garden again.

At five they came back, and we gathered, along with the fur people, in the living room to have a pre-dinner drink. As usual, Poppy commandeered Ben's lap, so she could poke her little nose into his armpit and interfere with his attempts to get at his stein of beer. George curled up in my lap, but allowed me the freedom to sip my scotch. Jody took the couch and Ming cuddled up beside her.

For a change, Ben was chatty and regaled Jody with his ideas for new plants for the greenhouse. I knew he was pleased when she asked questions.

But finally, that conversation petered out and Jody said, "It seems so strange not to have Jason here."

She sounded just a bit tearful, so I decided to try and make her laugh. "Ben," I said, "would you mind getting me another scotch? I'm suffering from feline paralysis."

"What's feline paralysis?" Jody asked.

"It's a condition that I frequently suffer from. It means I am unable to move because I have a cat on my lap. I get to keep sitting down because I'm obligated to provide the lap until the cat decides to leave."

"And Holly makes full use of it," Ben said, as he rose. Poppy had jumped down from his lap a few minutes before, so he had no excuse to keep sitting. "As the encatted person, she gets

waited on hand and foot. I bring scotch and snacks and take away the dishes afterward. I bring her the TV remote if she wants it. As the disencatted person, I get stuck with answering the phone or the door and attending to whatever is cooking in the frying pan or the oven."

Jody chuckled. "You certainly seem to pay more attention to your cats' pleasure than to what you want."

"Yes," I said, handing Ben my empty glass, "but that means we get to have cats on our laps. Which is a bonus, in my opinion."

"What happens," she asked, "if you both have a cat on your lap?"

"That's a tough one," I said. "If something happens which needs to be taken care of immediately, we make the decision about who has to get up based on which cat needs more attention and which cat is less likely to come back to a lap once we sit down."

"I agree that it's a hard decision," Ben said, handing me the refilled glass. "Cats don't care what is fair. They just want what they want."

Jody laughed. "I noticed! But they're so sweet. Especially Ming." She scratched around his ears, and he purred. "So, if you are both encatted, you can only get up for emergencies?"

"Depends on what you call emergencies," I said. "Aside from the phone ringing or the smell of smoke, it's not acceptable to push a cat off one's lap except for appointments or really needing to pee."

Ben was grinning. "When it's absolutely necessary to dump a cat off my lap, I have to try and transfer the cat to Holly's lap, based on the theory that one human lap is as good as another."

"That hardly ever works, though," I said. "The dumped cat is usually so annoyed that he or she will stalk off to some other room, leaving us to languish with one less cat to enjoy."

Jody laughed again. "Okay, supposing you don't dump a cat off your lap, but you managed to coax it to voluntarily leave?"

"That's acceptable," Ben said, "but it's difficult to do. It means you'd have to be prepared when you sit down and, if you've got cat treats in your pocket, the cat will already have found and demolished them. Which means you have nothing left to use as a bribe."

"Coaxing never does any good," I said. "Even if they understand what you're saying, they have selective hearing. I could ask his Magnificence here to vacate my lap and he wouldn't flick an ear. But if I said the word 'tuna,' he'd look up and then expect to be served tuna right where he sits." At that moment, George sat up, stared at my face and, not getting any response other than a guilty look, turned around a couple of times and curled up again.

"Any other rules?" Jody asked.

"Oh yes," Ben said. He was obviously enjoying himself. "Any cat who has been to the vet that day or needs medication gets lap priority." Poppy had returned to occupy his lap and Caesar had joined her.

I told Jody the new arrangement of cats. "If both of us are encatted, but one of us has two lap cats, the way it is now, the doubly-encatted one gets feline paralysis priority."

"This gets complicated," she said. "Do the cats ever argue with each other about who gets the lap?"

"Oh, sometimes," I said. "As Ben said, cats don't understand justice. And we don't referee disputes. If one cat is on a lap, and another cat horns in on her space, we let nature take its course."

"Unless," Ben added, "it looks like the argument is going to escalate beyond just glaring contests. Then we're allowed to get up, which removes the lap and therefore the cause of the argument."

Jody had lost the strained look she'd had when we first sat down and seemed to enjoy playing our game. "But what happens now? I just heard the oven timer. Do you have to let supper dry out until the cats decide to move?"

"No," Ben said. "Supper being ready is a real emergency. Because if I don't get to the table right now, I'm going to starve to death." He picked up Poppy and Caesar, rose, and put the cats on his chair. They knew what that meant and headed for the kitchen. George jumped down off my lap and followed them. Ming slipped out from under Jody's hand and did the same.

"I see," she said. "Supper being ready is an emergency for them, too."

"Indeed," I said. "It would be a tragedy if they were to miss any handouts at the supper table."



Wednesday passed slowly. Ben couldn't think of anything else for Jody to do in the garden, so she and I spent much of the day tidying the house and doing laundry. She looked up eagerly every time the phone rang and sighed when it wasn't Robert Geraghty. "It's too soon for him to phone," I said. "He might have been able to see Jason yesterday, but he won't have had time to do much else."

After lunch, as we were washing the dishes, I told her my sixtieth birthday was coming up and that Ben was trying to secretly plan a party. "He didn't ask me if I wanted a party, so I'm going to tease him a little. I'll tell him I have a bucket list and I want to do some of those things for my birthday. Something that will take me away from Adrianna so that he can worry about me not showing up for the party, the way he threatened to boycott his party last year."

"What would you like to do?" Jody asked.

"It may sound silly, but I don't have a bucket list. I'm happy with my life here and I don't have much interest in traveling anywhere."

"What I'd like to try sometime is zip-lining," she said. "It sounds like it would be really exciting. More so than riding Cal's bike, because I'd be flying through the air."

"Ben would never believe I wanted to do that," I said. "He knows I'm afraid of heights. He probably wouldn't believe that I've always had a yen to visit Tibet, either, since I've never mentioned it. And I honestly never thought of it until you mentioned your friends." I put the soup pot on the drain board and let the water out of the sink. "I wonder where the term 'bucket list' came from."

"You could look it up on the internet," Jody suggested.

We went into my den, where I removed a protesting George from the laptop and opened the lid. After a moment or two, I got the answer. "Well, of course! I should have known that. It says that a bucket list is a list of things to do before you die and comes from the term 'kicked the bucket.' It also says it was first used just last year. Gosh, I'm usually not that up to date."

"I noticed," Jody said, and smiled. "You don't have a microwave and you don't have a dishwasher."

"Oh, you're not the first to comment on that. I don't feel that I need either one, though, now that I'm no longer tied to a nine-to-five job. Besides, a dishwasher uses way too much water, and our well isn't productive enough to handle that kind of demand."

Before I could explain why I didn't need a microwave, the phone rang. It was Maggie. "Come on over for supper tonight. I'm having vegetarian lasagna and salad."

Jody was disappointed that the call wasn't from Robert, but she was happy about the lasagna.

We spent the rest of the afternoon tidying up kitchen cupboards and at five-thirty, she and Ben and I walked across the yard to Maggie's house.

Cal was there, too, and the five of us sat around the living room with various kinds of drinks, looking out the patio doors at the sea view and encouraging the four cats to lap-sit.

"I phoned Norm and Kris today to see how Sir Oliver is doing," Maggie said. "Kris told me he settled right in. He picked Norm as his main person and when Norm is home between fishing trips, the cat follows him everywhere."

"Is Oliver terrorizing the wildlife?" Cal asked.

"Only the rats and mice so far."

"I'm glad the little guy has his own kingdom now," I said. "Just imagine how many people would envy him having his very own island!"

"I kind of like having other people on my island," Ben said, "but not too many." BJ sat beside his chair, blissful because his head was being scratched.

"That's the way I feel about cats today," Maggie said. "Sometimes I think four is far too many. But that's because they want to hog all the sleeping spots."

"Surely that king-size bed is big enough to accommodate you and four cats," Ben said.

"Most of the time it is," Maggie said. "But last night was a problem. Part of it was the fact that I couldn't sleep. Doran was the first to hop up on the bed and he insisted that I move over so he could claim the spot I'd already warmed. I didn't feel like arguing so I moved over and curled around him."

"What about BJ?" I asked. "Doesn't he usually sleep on the bed, too?"

"Oh, he was already asleep at the foot of the bed," Maggie said. "Anyway, I still couldn't get to sleep, so I moved out here with a blanket and a pillow and stretched out on the couch. Five minutes later Shaz pounced on me and meowed. I knew she wanted me to leave because the couch is her favorite spot during the day, and she thinks she owns it. But I refused to budge. I told her she could go share the bed with Doran and finally she flounced off in a snit."

"Well, at least you won that round," Cal said. He was sitting on the couch, with Smoke in his lap and Blue Eyes snuggled up against his thigh. I had Shaz on my lap and Jody was on the floor, playing with Doran.

"Yes, but I lost the next one," Maggie said. "I still couldn't get to sleep, so I got up and took a valerian capsule. When I came back from the bathroom, Shaz was curled up right in the middle of the blanket."

We all laughed. "Don't tell me you stayed up all night," I said.

"No," Maggie said. "I decided all's fair in love and bed-snatching, so I went back to the king-size and made the other three cats move over. They grumbled but it didn't take them long to settle down again. And I actually did go to sleep, so it all ended well."

Jody said, "Ming growls in his sleep sometimes, and he talks and snores, too. He's got this gentle little snore that's almost like a purr."

"Does he sleep with you every night?" I asked.

"Only since Jason went away," Jody said.

"I take it you haven't heard from him or Robert," Maggie said.

Jody sighed. "No, not yet. It's really hard waiting but I can often ignore my sadness by turning a blind eye to it."

Cal guffawed. "That's a good one, Jody." He turned to Maggie. "I can smell the lasagna. Do you think it's ready?"

A few minutes later, we were sitting around the kitchen table, tucking into spicy lasagna and

crisp lettuce salad. When we were finished and leaning back, waiting for the surprise Maggie had promised for dessert, Jody voiced a question.

"Why do cats knead, Holly? Every time a cat sits on my lap, it kneads my legs."

"Kittens knead their mothers to stimulate milk production," I said. "Some people believe kneading behavior is nostalgic of kittenhood and lets them relive the happy moments they had as little ones. I don't know if that's true, but they always seem happy when they're doing it."

"My goats are happy when they're causing trouble," Cal said. "I had this older guy come to my place last week to look at the new kids, with the idea of maybe buying one or two. He left his wooden cane propped up against the side of the goat barn and Shirley, my lead doe, walked over and bit a chunk right out of it."

"So it's true that goats will eat anything," Ben said.

"No, they won't," Cal said. "But they do eat blackberry bushes, thorns and all, and don't seem to mind."

"I'll have to borrow a couple someday," Ben said. "The blackberry hedge that runs around the perimeter of our place is getting out of hand."

"What do your goats look like?" Jody asked. "Are they big?"

I opened my mouth to answer, but Cal beat me to it for a change. "Holly always says they look like balls of wool with four feet sticking out the bottom and two horns sticking out the top. But they also have cute floppy ears and yellow eyes. And no, they're not big, not like a horse or a cow. But bigger than a big dog. You'll have to come over and meet them some day."

"I'd like that," Jody said. "Are they cuddly?"

"The kids are. You can pick them up and hold them. They'll sit in your lap and follow you around."

"Did your visitor buy any kids?" Ben asked.

Cal nodded. "Took two of them. He was actually kind of pleased about the cane. He said his wife gave it to him and thought it was a treasure because it was hand-carved, but he didn't like it much. Said it wasn't the right length for him."

"So all's well that ends well, as it so often does," Maggie said, heading for the fridge. "Now it's time for dessert. I warn you, it's ultra decadent."

"What is it?" I asked.

"Viennese meringue pie," Maggie said, setting it on the table with an air of pride. "The crust is pure meringue. The filling is melted dark chocolate mixed with whipped cream. The calories are so packed in so tight they're screaming to get out."

We all moaned in anticipatory pleasure and not another word was said for the next ten minutes.



Thursday dragged by and I leapt for the phone every time it rang, in case it was Robert reporting on Jason's situation. But no such luck. Jody roamed around the house and around the yard, looking forlorn.

I was feeling rather forlorn myself by Friday noon and wondering if I should phone Robert again. But, as Jody and I were washing the lunch dishes, a Smart Car came zipping into our driveway. I held my breath, not daring to believe it could be Robert.

But it was. He emerged from the driver's seat, and I said to Jody, "That's Robert Geraghty! Why did he drive up here from Victoria instead of phoning? Oh, he brought Jason with him!"

We both made a dash for the back door, and she beat me to it. In the driveway, we met Robert and Jason, who were both grinning happily, and I felt like bouncing around the same way Nicky was doing. Jason grabbed Jody and they just stood there for a minute, holding on to each other.

"Come in," I said, after the initial greetings were over and Nicky realized nobody was going to produce a dog cookie, "and I'll put the coffee on. I want to hear about absolutely everything."

Ben, who was working in the greenhouse, had heard the car and he trooped in with the other three. I started the coffeemaker, put out mugs and small, fresh cinnamon buns, and joined the others at the table.

Robert said, "You want to hear all the news, Holly. In exchange, I want a tour of the museum. I'd like to see the results of the court case we were all involved in last year." He looked at Jason, who was sitting close to Jody and holding her hand. "I want to see your work. Holly says it's wonderful."

Jason nodded. He was still beaming. "Any time you like."

"Can we have the news first?" I begged.

"You've been very lucky," Robert said. "This could have dragged on a lot longer than it did if Holly hadn't called me." He put a cinnamon bun on his plate. "It was Mr. and Mrs. Fielding who filed a complaint against Jason through a judge and obtained a warrant for his arrest."

"I knew they had something to do with it!" Jody exclaimed.

"Unfortunately for them," Robert said, "their complaint was based on a sworn affidavit from a man I've come across before, in court. This man will do anything for money to support his drug habit and he was willing to lie under oath to take the Fieldings for as much as they would pay him."

"What did he lie about?" I asked.

"He swore that he'd bought a variety of drugs from Jason," Robert said. "As soon as I saw the affidavit, I knew it was probably phony and the police officer in charge of the case agreed. He interviewed the man, who admitted it was a fraud. He didn't care; he'd already been paid his money, though he probably will be charged. The Fieldings also alleged that Jason had unlawfully confined Jody against her will, abused her, and kept her drugged." Robert shook his head. "Though after talking to Jason, I wouldn't be surprised if they really believe that their accusations are true."

Jason let go Jody's hand so he could butter her cinnamon bun for her, and she said, "If I wasn't so happy about Jason being home, I'd be in a real rage against my parents. A blind rage, of course."

Robert blinked, then laughed. "You're a remarkable young woman if you can joke about it."

She shrugged. "They've been trying to keep me hemmed in for a long time, trying to control my life. I spent a lot of years being angry, furious or in a rage. It never got me anywhere. I finally accepted the fact that they would never give up and concentrated on avoiding them."

"So Jason is actually free?" Ben asked. "He's not out on bail or anything like that?"

"He's free. The case will never go to court." Robert smiled. "There will be another case, however."

Ben and I both leaned forward. "What?"

Robert took a sip of coffee. "The Fieldings will be charged with wasting police time and court time and using fraudulent information to do so."

I expelled a long breath. "Wonderful! It couldn't happen to a more deserving couple."

Ben was beaming. "I wish we could explain to George the Magnificent that the man who

was so rude to him will have to face some punishment." Robert raised his eyebrows and Ben went on to explain that Parker Fielding had twice dumped a sleeping George off a chair.

"I didn't know cats were so sensitive," Robert said.

"George is of royal blood and knows it," I said. "Be careful how you treat him, or he could have you beheaded."

Robert rolled his eyes. "I'll keep it in mind." He turned to Jason. "Would you show me your paintings now?"

Jody and Jason led him up the stairs, with me shouting after them, "You should stop in at the gallery in Mora Bay and look at the ones there, too."

Jason turned to smile at me. "It's okay. I'll tell him."

When they came back, Robert was holding Jason's colored pencil painting of a deep red peony in full bloom. "It's my favorite flower," he said. "I grow dozens in my yard."

Jody handed me a jar of Indian hot mango pickles. "Jason managed to find these before Robert brought him back. He didn't get time to see our Tibetan friends, though."

I managed to find a large envelope for Robert's drawing and put the pickles in a cupboard before Robert rushed me out the door.

"I'd like to see the museum now," he said. "I want to catch the five o'clock ferry so I can get back to Victoria at a decent hour."

The kids went back upstairs, Ben went to work, and Robert and I spent a leisurely hour wandering around the heritage museum and Brentwood Park before he brought me back to Holly Haven.

"I'm very pleased with the park," he said. "That case was a worthwhile effort." He gave me a wicked little smile. "Have you heard what happened to Trevor Brentwood?"

"You mean apologizing to the other doctors and losing his golf club membership? Oh, yes! Gossip travels fast, even across the Georgia Strait. And Robert, what do we owe you for taking care of Jason so well?"

"Nothing," he said. "I offered to pay Jason for the drawing because I know they're broke, and then give my bill to you and Ben. But he insisted that I take it in payment if I was willing. And I was. I'll treasure that drawing of the flowers that I've always loved. It will also remind me how satisfying it is to see justice done."

"As Maggie would say, all's well that ends well. Do you think we've heard the last of the Fieldings?"

Robert shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe not. That could depend on what kind of sentence the judge hands down." He glanced at his watch. "I must go. Holly, it's been good seeing you and Ben again. Next time you're in Victoria, give me a call and we'll do something frivolous, like have lunch."

I watched him drive out to the road and speed away toward Mora Bay before I wandered back into the house. His visit had been a wonderful way to end the week, I thought.

But the day wasn't over yet, and I got another delightful surprise when Ben offered to make supper. When he was in the mood to cook, he did it very well. Around five o'clock I sat in the living room to celebrate Jason's return with a scotch. Jason and Jody were already sharing the couch with Ming and Kaylie. Poppy and Caesar had just claimed my lap when I heard Ben's voice from the kitchen.

"What would you like, my love? Chicken, beef, or fish?"

I called back, "Thank you. Chicken would be lovely."

Ben appeared in the doorway with a soup ladle in his hand and a confused look on his face

and said, "You're having pea soup and egg salad sandwiches. I was talking to George the Magnificent."





## Chapter IX -- Picnics

A couple of weeks after Jason returned, Maggie came over for morning coffee, as she often did, and joined Ben, Jason, Jody, and me in attacking a plate of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies. "These are just delicious," she said. "They must have just come out of the oven because the chocolate is still melted."

"I was feeling creative this morning," Jody said. "Holly helped me take the pans out of the oven, but the rest of it I did myself."

"I hope you feel creative often," Maggie said. "My tongue is in heaven." She finished her second cookie. "I had a phone call from Norm and Kris on Riggby Island yesterday. They invited all of us to visit their island this weekend and say hello to Oliver. What do you think?"

"That's a great idea," Ben said. "It's about time I had a day off."

The rest of us agreed. "We'll have to find somebody to babysit Nicky," I reminded Ben, "otherwise he'll wander off and we'll have a hard time finding him."

"Maybe we should take him with us," Ben said. "What day do they want us to come? And how are we going to get there? We'll have to rent a boat and I don't know anything about boat motors."

"Norm said he'd come to the Mora Bay dock with his fish boat and pick us up," Maggie said. "All we have to do is let him know whether we want to come tomorrow or Sunday and roughly what time we could be on the dock." She glanced at Ben. "Don't bother asking Cal to babysit Nicky and the chickens. He's coming with us."

"Mr. Mighty will make sure the chickens are all right," Ben said. "Let's take Nicky. Norm doesn't need to worry about him chasing deer because he doesn't do that."

"No," I said, "your guard dog just herds them into a compact little group, the better to munch on the rose bushes."

Ben sighed. "I don't want to put a fence around the rose garden like I did around the vegetable garden. Anyway, they don't munch on it often." He frowned. "I'll have to find Nicky's collar and leash."

"They're in the mud room, probably underneath some winter coats," I said. "Maggie, what about BJ? Should we take him?"

She shook her head. "He fits through the cat door, just barely. He can use the cat pen as a toilet. I'll clean it up when we get back."

"I'll take my camera," Jason said. "The more pictures I have, the more I'm inspired to draw."

Jody punched him on the arm. "You go, honey!"

We decided to make the trip on Sunday, which gave Ben time to take another load of produce to the grocery store and me time to finish my next *Tidelines* column. It also gave the sky time to dump all its rain on Saturday, so that Sunday dawned bright and sunny.

"What a great day!" Jason said, sliding his arms into the straps of his backpack as soon as we'd parked and started walking down to the dock. Cal and Maggie were only a minute behind us. They would come in his truck, he'd said, because he didn't want to leave the Harley out in the open and unattended all day.

We'd only been standing on the dock, watching the sunlight sparkle on the water, for maybe five minutes before Norm brought his boat, the *Riggby Rover*, gently alongside. He tied up fore and aft and helped each of us climb aboard. I introduced Ben and the kids to him, but he and Cal already knew each other.

Nicky balked at getting up on the wooden step Norm had put down for the rest of us, to make it easier to climb on board, and Ben had to carry him onto the deck.

"And who's this?" Norm asked.

"His name is Nicky," Ben said. "He was supposed to be a guard dog, but all he does is herd deer as if they were reindeer. Which means they think he's ridiculous and so they pay no attention to him. And he likes everybody, so if a thief tried to climb in one of our windows, Nicky would probably give him a boost."

"Does he chase animals?" Norm asked.

Ben shook his head. "He used to chase squirrels, but those little trapeze artists are so quick, he never had a chance. Our cats still try to catch them, but Nicky gave up long ago."

Cal and Ben, with Nicky practically clinging to his ankles, stood beside Norm at the wheel and the rest of us stayed on the afterdeck. Jason snapped pictures. Maggie and I absorbed the scenery: blue sky, blue sea, white sails slack in the still air, seagulls skimming the water, green islands basking in the morning sun. I described all this to Jody while she absorbed sunshine and sounds. I'd tried to imagine what it would be like to rely so much on my ears and was amazed at the amount of information one could read in sounds.

It was a twenty-minute trip, though it didn't seem that long by the time we glided alongside the small wharf on the south end of Riggby. Kris was there to meet us, and she tied up, while Norm shepherded us off the boat.

"Oh, look!" Maggie cried. "There comes Oliver!"

He was walking down the paved path from the weathered log house to the wharf, tail straight up, the picture of dignity. At the sound of Maggie's voice, he hurried his pace a little and went straight to her for a quick pat. Nicky was wagging his tail, perhaps hoping for a cat kiss, but Oliver avoided him and went to Norm.

"He always comes to greet me," Norm said. He put Oliver on his shoulder. "Of course, he knows the sound of the *Rover's* engine now."

After more introductions to Kris, we strolled up the path toward the house, Kris in the lead and Norm herding us along from behind. It was so quiet I could hear the sea lapping against the dock pilings. "What do you do for electricity, Norm? I don't hear a generator."

"Oh, we have one," he said, "but it's inside thick walls of insulated concrete, so you won't hear it unless you're close by, or I open the door to service it."

Kris led us across a roofed veranda that extended the full width of the house and in through a living room with a big stone fireplace to the enormous kitchen. Pots and pans hung from rough, unfinished beams and a long table sat beneath wall-to-wall windows that looked out over the sea to Melfort and Adriana Islands. The delicious smell of bread baking in the oven made my mouth water.

"Sit down," Kris invited, "and we'll have some coffee." We settled ourselves around the table, Nicky taking his usual position beside Ben's feet.

Jason slid his backpack from his shoulders and opened it. He pulled out a cookie tin. "These are from Maggie," he said.

"Peanut butter and honey cookies," she said. "I hope nobody's allergic."

"I wouldn't care if I was," Norm said, reaching for one. "Peanut butter's my favorite."

"No matter what kind of cookie I suggest," Kris said, "he always wants peanut butter." She finished pouring coffee and sat down.

Jason pulled out a small bag and Ben handed it to Norm. "I thought Oliver would like some tuna-flavored treats."

Norm grinned. "He might. He's getting pretty spoiled eating fresh halibut, though."

"Lucky cat!" exclaimed Cal. "Maybe I should come fishing with you."

Jason took out yet another item from the pack before he put it down. He opened the envelope and slid out the painting he'd done of Oliver. "I wanted you to have this as payment for giving Sir Oliver his own island."

Norm and Kris stared at the drawing for so long I thought maybe they didn't like it. But, when Norm looked up, he had tears in his eyes. "Will you look at that! It's like he might actually start washing his face, or purring."

"It's wonderful," Kris said. "I've never seen a picture I liked so much." She looked at Jason. "Did you draw that from life?"

"No, from a photograph," he said. "Photographs don't get up and walk away just when you're trying to get the fine details down."

Kris looked at Norm. "Maybe he could draw Harry."

Norm's face lit up. "He sure could."

"Of course, he could," Jody said firmly.

"Who's Harry?" I asked. "Was that the cat you had before Sir Oliver?"

"That's right," Norm said. "He was a Maine Coon, a real big guy, about eighteen pounds when he was full grown. We got him as a kitten and named him after Harry, my best buddy in high school."

"It was a good choice," Kris said. "The human Harry was quiet and easy-going and liked hanging out with Norm. The cat Harry turned out to be just the same." She grabbed a cookie from the tin. "I'll go find some pictures of Harry."

She was back in seconds. "Here's the one I keep on our mantel. It's probably the best, but I know we have others."

We all leaned in to see the enlarged photograph she had handed to Jason. Harry had been a brown tabby with green eyes. He had the long hair, called pantaloons or britches, on the backs of his legs and hair between his toes which would have helped keep him warm during Maine winters. He also had a bushy, plumed tail, a broad head, and wide-set ears topped with tufts of fur known as lynx-tips.

"He must be a purebred," I said. "His fur looks long and dense and he has a ruff on his chest like a lion's mane."

Kris nodded. "Yes, he was a purebred. We had to go to Victoria to get him. He was so much fun as a kitten, playful and energetic." She sighed at the memory.

"He was the same all his life." Norm took the picture back to look at it again. "Even when he reached his full growth, he was full of fun. He liked to play catch and we got him a little ball that he could grab with his teeth. I'd throw it and he'd race off to get it and then bring it back for me to throw again."

"He went everywhere with us," Kris said, "even out picking berries. And he had this funny voice. He'd say something that sounded like a combination of a purr and a meow, sort of like a trill."

"Did he talk a lot?" I asked.

"He wasn't noisy," Norm answered. "He only talked when he had something to say, like greeting us when we came back from Adriana, or when I came home from fishing. He'd tell us when he was hungry or had killed a mouse. And he almost always answered with a meow when I said something to him."

"Did you ever take him out on the *Rover*?" Ben asked.

"I tried once," Norm said, smiling. "He hated it, and he was making so much fuss by the time I was barely a hundred feet from shore that I took him back to the dock. I was scared he'd jump off the boat and try to swim back."

"He could have done that," I said, "though he wouldn't have liked it, not with all that thick fur. He'd have been one seriously waterlogged cat."

"So, what do you think?" Norm asked Jason. "Can you do a drawing of Harry from that photograph?"

"Yes," Jason said. "The things you've said about him will help, too. If you have any more pictures, I'd like to see them."

"I'll find them while Norm shows you around the island," Kris said. "Of course, we'll want them back. And we need to know what you're going to charge."

"Let me think about it," Jason said. "I've never done a commission before."

Norm slapped him on the shoulder. "We can probably afford it. Just keep in mind I don't want to put a mortgage on the island."

Jason laughed. "Not likely!"

As Norm rose from the table and the rest of us followed suit, Kris said, "Oh, and another thing Harry liked to do was sleep in cardboard boxes or any small space he could barely fit into. Just the way Oliver was sleeping in that wicker basket when we saw him at your place, Maggie."

"Most cats like boxes or even drawers, sinks and laundry baskets," I said. "That's because the confined space provides protection from predators, and it's a great place to watch for prey without being seen."

Maggie spoke up. "Holly has told me that cats sleep eighteen to twenty hours a day, and I guess it makes sense that they like to sleep in places where they're safe from attack."

"A box is a great place for a kitten to hide and bat at your ankles when you go by, too," I said.

Jason laughed. "I wondered why there were a couple of empty boxes in your living room. I thought you'd unpacked something and hadn't gotten around to throwing out the containers."

"No," I said, "just indulging my cats with handy toys."

"Come on," said Norm, "I'll show you around the island."

We followed him down the veranda steps, around the side of the house, and along a path beside a vegetable garden with a ten-foot fence around it.

Ben raised his eyebrows. "Deer?"

"Yes," Norm said. "It's the only way to keep them from eating everything we grow." He pointed out the generator enclosure, his large workshop, and the chicken house. The hens clucking around the hen yard were Barred Rocks, feathered in white and dark-gray stripes.

Ben went over to the fence to get a closer look. Even Nicky seemed interested, wagging his tail, though he kept shaking his head, trying to get rid of his lead. "They're good-looking birds."

"Good layers, too," Norm said.

"We've got Rhode Island Reds," Ben said, "and a White Leghorn rooster who thinks he owns our entire two hectares."

"Five acres," I muttered.

As usual, Ben ignored my objection to the metric system. "I also bought some Araucanas. They're cute as the dickens. Very small, with golden yellow plumage and tufts of feathers on top of their heads. Ours lay pale green eggs."

"Do you eat the eggs?" Norm asked.

"Oh sure," Ben said. "It's just the shells that are different. The insides look exactly like any

other hen's egg, except they're small. And they taste the same. The only problem is that the birds are inclined to be skittish and like to nest in the brush. We're always having to crawl in under the blackberry vines to collect eggs."

"Talking of cute," Norm said, "you should see the Barred Rock chicks. Instead of being yellow, like most chicks, they're black, with little splotches of white here and there. Fluffy little things."

"Like baby Angoras, I bet," Cal said.

Jody was holding my arm as we walked because Jason was snapping pictures every five seconds, capturing all the scenes new to him. Norm led us past an old log structure that he said had been a pigsty many years before and then into the forest.

"I keep the path brushed out," he said, "and the only trees I cut down are those which look like they might blow over in the next storm. The place has been selectively logged ever since my great-grandparents first came here, so there's still plenty of old-growth timber."

"Old-growth is pretty valuable these days," Cal said.

"Oh, I've had offers, many of them," Norm said, "but I'm not interested. Trees have a right to a long, peaceful life, just like humans."

After climbing a long slope, the path led us into a natural meadow ringed by arbutus trees and with a sandstone ledge in the center. We stood on the sandstone and looked out over a panorama of green islands and blue sea.

"This is so beautiful," Maggie said. "Not just the view, but the island itself."

I described what we could see to Jody. "It's a typical Gulf Island with arbutus, oak, fir, and cedar, and also fairly rocky, so there are open areas. Have you ever seen an arbutus?"

"No," she said, "but I'd like to."

Jason came with us to the edge of the meadow and both he and Jody ran their hands over the smooth, thin, reddish-brown bark, peeling in papery flakes and strips to reveal pale olive green beneath.

"The tree blooms in April and May," I said. "It has dense clusters of white, waxy flowers that hang at the ends of twigs. Quite beautiful, but the flowers were finished three or four weeks ago."

"It feels lovely," Jody said, continuing to pet the tree.

"I'll take some pictures," Jason said. "I'd like to paint this tree. Not just for the color of the bark and the shiny leaves, but the branches are interesting, too. They grow in every direction. It would be a fun tree to climb."

"Go ahead," I said. "Nobody's looking."

He laughed. "No thanks. If I fell out of the tree and broke a leg, it would be a long haul getting me home."

We continued on to the north end of the island, then along the eastern side, stopping now and then to admire the rocky beach and hoping to spot leaping orcas, until we were back at the little bay on the southern end where Norm kept his boat. Again, we walked up the path to the house.

Kris greeted us with a handful of photographs of Harry and the announcement that lunch was ready. We sat down to halibut chowder and fresh bread, which was so good that nobody said a word until all the bowls were emptied for the first time.

With a quick wink at Maggie, I broke the silence. "I have a birthday coming up, a special one, and I'm thinking that maybe I should celebrate it by doing some of the things on my bucket list."

Ben looked at me blankly. "What bucket list?"

"Oh," I said airily, "just a few things I've been thinking about for the last couple of years. I finally realized it would be silly to put them off until I get too old to do them."

"You'll never be too old for anything," Cal said gallantly.

"What kind of things do you want to do?" Kris asked.

I took another sip of coffee. "Well, Jody was telling me about her Tibetan friends who came here a couple of years ago. I've always been interested in Tibet."

"Oh, me too," said Jody. "Tibetans are mostly Buddhists."

"But the country is all mountains," Ben protested. "You don't want to go mountain climbing."

"No, I don't," I said. "But surely they have airplanes and buses. I could go all around the country and take photographs. Summer would be the best time to go, too, because they must get snowed in during the winter." I made a mental note to check that assumption before I said too much more about Tibet.

Ben snorted. "I'll bet you can find an issue of National Geographic that's devoted to Tibet. Looking at the pictures in that would be a lot cheaper than going there."

"I know that," I said, "but how can I pet a Tibetan Mastiff puppy unless I actually go there? The dogs are quite rare, you know."

"I never heard of them," Ben said grumpily.

"Tibetan Mastiffs are guard dogs," I said. "The article I read on the Net says they might be the ancestors of the Newfoundland or the Great Dane. Lots bigger than Nicky, anyway."

"What do they look like?" Maggie asked, getting in on the game.

"They have a long double coat because they live in a cold climate and it's basically black and tan, sometimes with a touch of gold or chocolate brown. There's no 'dog smell' either. They're supposed to be courageous and agile, even if they are heavy."

"Would you want to bring back a puppy?" Jason asked.

I sighed. "Sure, but I don't think a life here would be good for a dog like that. They love snow and can't tolerate much heat. And, because they like to roam, we'd have to build a heavy chain link fence or a tight wooden fence to keep him in. Apparently, they can chew through anything lighter than that." I sighed again. "Anyway, I hate to see dogs penned up. So I guess the only way I can see and touch a Tibetan Mastiff is to go to Tibet."

"I guess so," said Ben. "A dog like that would probably be expensive to feed, too." He rose and pushed back his chair. "I think it's time we let Norm and Kris get on with their day." He smiled at them. "Thanks for coffee and lunch and the tour. It's been great and we'd be glad to return the favor any time you come to Adriana. There's always coffee in the pot and cookies in the tin."

We all trekked down to the dock, Norm and Jason bringing up the rear while they negotiated a price for a painting of Harry. When we got to the *Rover*, it took both Ben and me to lift Nicky on board.

"What's his problem?" Norm asked.

"This is the first time he's been on a boat, and I don't think he likes a floor that won't stay still," Ben said.

I could tell Ben wasn't keen on a wife who wouldn't stay still either, but it might keep him busy thinking of arguments against my bucket list for the next few weeks and worrying about whether I'd show up for my own birthday party.



When the phone rang on Monday afternoon, I was surprised to hear Robert Geraghty's voice. "Is it good news or bad news?" I asked.

His laughter was full of delight. "It's good news. The Fieldings were charged with wasting police and court time and the case has already gone to court."

"Oh, that's fast! I thought it took cases months, or even years, to go to trial."

"This wasn't actually a trial," Robert said, "because the Fieldings pleaded guilty. I think it was decided so quickly because the judge who signed the warrant for Jason's arrest was extremely annoyed with them and wanted them to know it."

"So, what was the sentence? Something they'll remember?"

Robert laughed again. "Oh, I think so. He gave them a hefty fine and sentenced them to sessions with a psychiatrist three times a week for the next six weeks."

It was my turn to laugh in delight. "Jody will be very pleased about that. And so will Jason and everybody else here. I wonder if it will do any good."

"We may never know, but I am going to enjoy thinking about it. Are Jason and Jody there? I'd like to tell them, too."

"No, they've gone walkabout with a camera for the afternoon. Shall I have them call you?"

"Don't bother," Robert said. "You can give them the news. But if I hear anything further, I'll give you a call."

Jason and Jody were back in time to join Ben and me for afternoon coffee and we raised our mugs to toast the judge who'd sentenced the Fieldings.

"What do you think, Jody?" I asked. "Will a shrink be able to break through that cast-iron attitude of theirs?"

She sighed. "I hope so. It would be nice to have parents who actually listen to what I say. But I'm not holding my breath."



On Canada Day, the first of July, Ben and I decided it would be fun to celebrate the day by another little break in routine. "We could have a picnic outside," he said, as he finished his midmorning coffee and tossed the last half of his cookie into Nicky's waiting mouth, "but first I want to build a cat tree."

"What's a cat tree?" Jason asked. He was looking more and more relaxed as the days went by. The Mora Bay gallery had sold almost all his drawings and he was working hard to finish more so that Olivia would have a good supply for the summer tourist season.

"Kind of an observation post," Ben said. "Cats like to be up high so they can keep an eye on events as well as possible prey. They also like to be undercover so they can escape becoming prey themselves."

"But they have dozens of real trees they can use," I said. "Why duplicate nature's efforts?"

Ben put on his stubborn face. "Because my cat tree will only be for them, not for birds and squirrels. You know what those squirrels are like. They're cheeky little trapeze artists. They throw acorns at cats."

"You won't be able to stop birds landing on the cat tree," Jody said. "Or squirrels from climbing it."

"The observation platform on my tree is going to have a roof," Ben said. "The birds can land on the roof if they want, but I don't think that will last long, not with the cats only a few centimeters away from them. The squirrels might go up the tree to investigate but the same thing applies. They're not going to hang around where there are cats but no food."

"All good points," I said, draining my mug. "Where do you want to put the tree?"

Ben said, "Come on, I'll show you." He led us down the hall to what was called the front door, on the east side of the house, though we rarely used it, and out onto the veranda. "Over there to the left," he said, pointing. "They'll be able to see the orchard, the house, the garden, and also down the slope toward the sea. Well, it's simple; they'll be able to see in every direction because the platform will be open."

"No double-glazed windows and patios?" I asked, keeping a straight face.

"Holly, don't be ridiculous!" Ben glanced at me, realized I was kidding, and let his enthusiasm take over again. "I'm also going to wrap the bottom half of the posts in burlap, so they'll have four new scratching posts."

"Why do cats scratch?" Jody asked.

"Well, they seem to like it, for one thing," I said. "Stretching to scratch must feel good. But it also exercises the foot muscles and removes dead tissue from their nails."

"So what's the overall plan for this cat tree?" Jason asked. "I'm in the mood to take a few hours off, too, and I could help you, Ben."

"That would be great," Ben said. "Basically, it's just four posts set into the ground, with a platform near the top, then another platform to serve as a roof about a third of a meter above that." He thought for a minute. "No, maybe a little higher than that."

"How high are the posts?" Jody asked. "And how will the cats climb up to the platform?"

"I thought the platform should be about two meters off the ground," Ben said.

"Two yards," I said.

Ben looked at me and sighed. He knew I would never win my battle against the metric system. There was little merit in protesting it either, but it was something I could be stubborn about without bothering anybody else. "Then add another meter to give room for a roof and enough of the post to stick into the ground. Well, maybe a little more." He led the way back through the house to the mud room. "I have a pile of old lumber out behind the workshop, Jason. Let's go see what we can find to use for posts."

Jason and Ben disappeared outside, and Jody helped me tidy up the coffee things. "He never told me how the cats are supposed to climb up," she said.

"That's my fault," I said. "I can't resist teasing him about his love affair with the metric system and I threw him off his train of thought. But he will have figured out something for the cats to climb on."

"Well, I'll just wait and see," she said. "I assume that it's up to you and me to get a picnic lunch prepared."

"I don't think there's any doubt about that. And it had better be a picnic supper, a reward for a busy day. We can have something quick and easy for lunch. One thing we absolutely have to have for the picnic is potato salad."

"It wouldn't be a picnic without that," she said.

I pulled out a large saucepan, filled it with potatoes and water, and put it on the stove to boil. "We can make a green salad, too. And there are hotdogs in the fridge, both meat and soy, and whole wheat buns."

"That means we can have mustard and relish," Jody said. "And, oh, I nearly forgot. I'll open



that jar of Indian hot mango pickles that Jason brought back from Victoria."

"Good idea! And I will have to borrow Jason to help set up the picnic table on the patio in the center of the rose garden. That patio used to be a swimming pool, so it's a good size. We'll have plenty of room."

"And be able to smell the roses," Jody said, with a happy sigh. "I could go over to Maggie's and invite her."

"So you could. But she's not there. She and Cal went off this morning to see what entertainment they could find in Mora Bay."

"I forgot," said Jody. "Oh well, out of sight, out of mind, you know."

I laughed. "Of course. I know that feeling well."

Jody rose from the table. "What can I do to help?"

"Not a thing right now. I'll drain the potatoes when they're done, but they'll have to cool off for two or three hours before they can be peeled. I'd say we should start putting the food together about three."

"In that case," she said, "I'll go upstairs and have a cuddle with Ming and Kaylie. Ming is still looking after me, you know."

"I'm not surprised. He's a born caretaker."

Jody went upstairs to commune with the cats, and I went into my office to commune with my Muse. The Muse refused to show up, however, and I ended by providing a lap for two of my favorite fans, George and Cato. As soon as they heard voices and hammering outside, they deserted me to go supervise whatever peculiar things Ben might be doing. I watched Poppy sprawled asleep in a patch of sunshine on the carpet for a while and then went back to the kitchen to make a leisurely attack on lunch preparations, content with the fact that I'd come up with two more bucket list ideas to spring on Ben.

When I called Ben and Jason in for lunch, Nicky came with them, but Caesar, Cato, and George elected to stay at the construction site and give it a thorough inspection. If Ben found claw marks on the posts when he went back outside, we'd know the cats approved.

The conversation at lunch consisted mostly of the construction problems – all in metric, of course – and whether or not the cat tree should be painted. I suggested that they could simply let the wood mellow by itself because it would be very difficult to keep the cats off it. "I really don't want footprints of wet paint across the carpets."

Ben agreed. "Besides, the cats will try to lick the paint off their paws, and they might get sick. We'll do it sometime when we can figure out how to keep them away until the paint dries."

"Put up a sign," I said, straight-faced.

"Holly!" Then Ben grinned. "If I put up a sign that said there are a zillion stars in the sky, the cats might accept that. If the sign says 'wet paint' they'll insist on checking it out. Just like humans." He looked at me and raised his eyebrows. "You're in a frisky mood today."

"I'm finally getting the hang of how to celebrate my sixtieth," I said. "Do you want to hear the latest items on my bucket list?"

"Not really, but I suppose you're going to tell me anyway." He got up and headed for the mud room. Jason followed.

"All right," I called. "I'll save the news as a surprise for later. Jason, hang on a minute. I need you to help carry the barbecue out to the rose patio. Also a table."

By four o'clock the picnic food was all prepared and waiting to be carried outside. I decided not to do it until the last minute because wasp season was just beginning, and I didn't want to encourage the little black and yellow marauders. Jody and I went out to inspect the construction

zone and find out if the workers were hungry yet.

"Now we know how the cats are going to get to the platform," I said. "The boys have put up staggered shelves, on brackets, so the cats can just hop up from shelf to shelf." I led Jody over so she could see what they were like for herself.

"We're just about through," Ben said. "It was a lot more work than I thought it would be. I couldn't have got it done without Jason."

"It was kind of fun," Jason said, climbing down from the stepladder he was using to help Ben put the finishing touches on the roof. As soon as he was down, George went up the ladder so he could walk around the platform. Cato streaked up after him, in case the King required assistance of any kind.

"Is the picnic ready?" Ben asked. "Because I am. Well, I will be as soon as I've had a quick shower."

While Ben and Jason were having showers, Jody and I carried the food out to the picnic table. We'd just arranged the table when the roar of a motorbike announced the arrival of Cal and Maggie.

"You're having a picnic!" Maggie exclaimed. "That's delightful! Can we come?"

"Of course," I said. "Bring a couple of chairs. I'll get more plates and cutlery."

"I'll get out of my riding gear," Maggie said, "and I'll bring dessert."

Fifteen minutes later we all gathered around the table. We toasted Canada with beer or lemonade and started serving ourselves with food. Both Jody and Jason put some Indian hot mango pickles on their plates and offered the jar to the rest of us. "I'll try just a taste," I said. "If it's as hot as I think it is, my tongue will go numb."

"It'll be on fire first," Jason said.

"If that's what it's like, I'm not having any," Ben said.

Then the first wasp arrived. Before I could do anything to prevent it, he landed on Jody's pickles and took a bite. At once, he tumbled into the air, flipping over and over, finally landing on the concrete patio. We all watched as he kept on tossing himself around and I told Jody what was happening.

"I'll bet he'd give a lot for a drink of water," Ben said.

The wasp tried to fly, but couldn't, so he started crawling across the patio. Every few seconds he'd try to fly and finally, he did manage to get up off the ground and zoom away.

When we'd stopped laughing, I said, "Those pickles were a wonderful idea! Wasps for miles around will be warned away from this picnic."

Ben reached for the pickle jar. "I think I'll have some after all. Not for me, though. Just in case we get any more winged visitors."



## Chapter X -- Bucket List

Several days after our Canada Day picnic, the postman dropped a large envelope in the mailbox. From my station at the kitchen sink, I couldn't tell whether it was one of my short story submissions being returned by a magazine or a seed catalogue for Ben. My curiosity was too strong to be denied for more than a moment, so I walked up to the mailbox, along with George and Cato, who wanted to check the cedar shrub to see if they had any p-mail. To my delight, the envelope was from Sea Winds Spa. Now I could tease Ben about my proposed birthday trip to Victoria to make myself beautiful.

I did not spring this idea on him at coffee-time because, if he was irritated, he'd simply go back out to the garden or greenhouse. I decided to save it for our pre-dinner drink session, when he couldn't use the excuse of work to avoid a discussion. I also invited Maggie for drinks and dinner, partly because I knew she'd enjoy that, and partly because Ben was too courteous to walk out on company.

It turned out to be a good decision because I lost some of my audience. After lunch, Jason and Jody announced that they were going to Mora Bay to see Olivia at the gallery, take themselves out to dinner and maybe even see a movie.

"How are you getting there?" I asked. "And, more important, how are you getting back?"

Jason grinned and Jody looped the strap of her white cane over her wrist. "We'll hitch a ride, both ways," Jason said. "Don't worry. We've done this before."

"We don't dress like we have money," Jody added, "but if anybody tries to steal the fifty bucks, we're going to blow on ourselves, I'll beat him up with my cane."

Somewhat bemused, I waved them goodbye and watched them walk up the driveway and out onto the road. They hadn't gone more than three steps when Bill Trafford, who lived opposite, came out of his driveway, and stopped to pick them up. I decided I should quit worrying about the kids and worry about making dinner instead.

Maggie and Ben arrived at the same time, shucked their footwear in the mud room and appeared eager for food and drink, although not in that order. Shortly after five, we were settled in the living room, Ben with his beer, Maggie with a gin and tonic, and me with my usual scotch. Poppy claimed her favorite spot with Ben, her hind feet in his lap, her head stuck into his armpit and her tail sweeping dangerously close to the foam on his beer stein. Nicky lay at his feet. Maggie shared the couch with Ming and Kaylie. Ming had fussed at me several times during the afternoon because he couldn't find Jody, but he seemed to have settled down. My lap was filled with George and Cato, while Caesar perched on the arm of my chair. The brochure from Sea Winds Spa sat on the side table beside my scotch.

I was about to broach the subject of going to a spa for my birthday, when Maggie spoke. "You'll never guess what I just did."

"I'm sure I couldn't," said Ben, a touch of apprehension in his tone. "You're not going to buy your own motorcycle, are you?" He still hadn't quite forgiven Cal for buying one and taking Maggie for rides on it. In his eyes, aged mothers and motorcycles simply did not mix.

She smiled. "I got a budgie."

"A budgie!" I said, startled. "But how will a budgie survive in a house with four cats?"

"In a cage, for the time being," Maggie said. "I couldn't resist him; he's such a sweet little guy. He's green and his name is Pete. He talks, too."

"I take it he's an adult budgie and has been trained to talk," Ben said. He sounded quite

relieved. "You really will have to be careful, though. Smoke is too laid-back to be a hunter, but Doran will be waiting for a chance to rip out some of those green feathers. I'm not sure about Blue Eyes and Shaz."

"I don't know about Blue Eyes either, but Shaz is too lazy. Pete would have to walk right into her mouth before she did anything about him. And quite possibly she's even too lazy to pluck feathers," Maggie said. "And you're right. One of Cal's old cronies down in Ellis Bay just died. He had no family and none of his friends wanted this bird. As soon as I saw Pete, I knew I had to have him." She stopped to take a sip of her drink. "I don't know how it will work out; Pete is apparently used to having the run of the house. He may be unhappy confined to a cage."

"When did you get him?" I asked.

"About a week ago," she said. "A couple of days after our picnic. So far, he seems to be all right. The cats were curious at first, but they're more or less ignoring him now."

"What does he say?" Ben asked.

Maggie laughed. "Sometimes he says, 'pretty boy,' but more often he says, 'oh hell' or 'dammit.' Knowing some of Cal's friends, I guess I'm lucky he's not saying anything stronger."

"I want to come over and meet this green boy," I said, "but right now I'm going to tell you about one of the items on my bucket list. I thought going to a spa might be a good way to celebrate my birthday."

Ben looked startled. "Why on earth would you do something that frivolous?"

"Spas are supposed to be relaxing," I said. "After all, I've had a stressful few months getting Norma's house in shape to be a museum and dealing with Jody's parents." I paused. "I could even stay there for a few days and catch up with all my old bridge-playing friends and the people I used to work with."

"I'm sure that would be very relaxing, dear," Maggie said, getting into the spirit of my game. "I could cook suppers for you, Benjamin, while she's away."

"I sent for a brochure," I said. "Listen to what it says. 'Sea Winds Spa is all about you. Abandon yourself to the soothing tranquility of our European style spa, offering organic facials, body wraps and scrubs, and anti-aging facials. Relieve muscle tension and increase relaxation with hydrotherapy treatments. Treat your nails to a professional manicure or pedicure. We also offer waxing and make-up applications using the best cosmetics available.'"

Ben snorted. "You can soak in a hot bath at home. And what in hell is an organic facial?"

"This brochure says a facial is one of the most common ways of taking care of your skin," I said. "It's supposed to clean, exfoliate, nourish and moisturize it. Apparently, you have to be careful about what products are used because they have a list of long scientific names of ingredients to avoid."

"Which doesn't say anything about what they consider organic," Ben said.

"I was getting to that," I protested. "It says, 'Organic products are made with natural ingredients, not with synthetic chemicals, preservatives, fragrances, colors or petroleum-based ingredients.'"

"Okay," Ben said, "so tell me, what's a 'natural' ingredient? Mud? I've heard of women using mudpacks."

I riffled the pages of the brochure. Somewhere it answered that question. "Oh, here it is. 'The scientific combination of fruits, vegetables, flowers, and herbs provide the skin with needed nourishment. We use organic anti-aging formulas saturated with proteins, phytochemicals, vitamins, and antioxidants.'"

"Fruit, vegetables, flowers and herbs?" Ben said, his expression scornful. "You could just go

out to the greenhouse and rub your face with leaves and petals!"

Maggie laughed. "That's true, Benjamin, she could. But I expect it's more fun when the stuff is mixed into a cream, and somebody does it for you." She took the last sip of her gin and tonic. "I've read that royalty used to apply face masks made of herbs, fruits and clays. I'm sure that's where the name 'mudpack' comes from."

"You know what else it says, Ben?" I'd been dying to throw this one at him. "Facial masks have been known since ancient Egypt. Cleopatra often applied egg white to her face to make her skin smooth. So your ancient Romans must have had facials, too."

Ben gently removed Poppy and rose. "I definitely need another beer. What about you ladies?"

We both held out our empty glasses and Ben went to the kitchen. When he came back, he had another question. "I guess I understand what a facial is, but what is a body wrap or a body scrub?"

I had a sip of scotch and picked up the brochure again. "Sea Winds has it all listed here, along with prices."

Ben groaned. "Don't tell me prices. I don't want to know."

"They offer free parking," I said.

"Oh, wonderful. Go on, what's a body wrap? A blanket?"

"Don't be silly," I said. "It says here a body wrap includes a full-body sugar scrub, soothing wrap application, mini facial, shower and moisturizing application. Choose from three decadent flavors: coconut-mango, chocolate truffle or blueberry citrus bliss."

"Sugar scrub!" Ben exclaimed. "If that means they scrub your body with sugar, I can do that right here. You could lie outside on a mat, and I'd rub sugar into your skin, then let Nicky lick it off."

I giggled in spite of myself, imagining Nicky licking me all over. I'd have to have a thorough shower afterward, considering how often his breath smelled like tuna. "I don't know what they mean about the decadent flavors, though. What is it that has the flavor?"

"That's a puzzle," Maggie said. "It makes no sense to have flavors in the sugar, or the wrap, whatever that's made of, or the shower, or the moisturizing cream."

"I'd go for the blueberry citrus bliss myself," Ben said, "but I doubt Nicky would like any of them."

I went on reading. "Well, instead of that, I could have a Hungarian Herbal Mudwrap, which is supposed to be 'an active healer and detoxifier, stimulating and regenerating the epidermis, improving skin tone and vitality. It also includes a full-body sugar scrub of your choice, mini facial treatment, shower, and moisturizing application.' This one doesn't seem to be flavored, though. And it's only a hundred and sixty dollars."

Ben winced so violently that Poppy complained and jumped down from his lap.

"Oh," I said, "and I could also have a Vichy shower, for just another twenty."

"What's a Vichy shower?" Maggie asked.

"Not a clue," I said. "I guess that's one of the treats I'll learn about when I get there. Oh, wait a minute, here it is. You lie on a massage table while overhead jets release water at varying pressures and temperatures."

"I've got that covered, too," Ben said, and grinned at me. "You can just lie in the bathtub, and I'll turn the shower on."

"That would probably work," I said. "Hot water, though, not cold." I turned a page. "They also offer what they call a beautifying body buff, but it sounds just like a body wrap, except there

are more flavors. Coconut, cucumber-mint, and Mimosa champagne. I wonder if they offer scotch or Irish whiskey?"

"I'd prefer blackberry or raspberry," Maggie said, "but it doesn't sound as if they go quite that far."

"They could offer lemon, as in lemon meringue pie," I suggested. "That would really be good."

"What else can you have done in this chamber of tortures?" Ben asked.

"Lots of stuff," I said. "For example, a pedicure, including callus removal, a foot and lower leg softening sugar scrub, with hot towels, and foot massage and nail polish. And listen, it says all pedicures include a complimentary eye treatment. What do you suppose that is?"

"Sounds weird to me," Ben said, trying to coax Poppy back onto his lap. "I know that Nicky and the cats think you have eyes in the back of your ankles because you always know when they're doing something bad, but I've never noticed that you actually have eyes there."

"I don't. It's just that I can read their furry little minds."

"I've learned to do that with my furry friends, too," Maggie said.

"They offer other options with the pedicure," I said. "I could upgrade to a private room, it says here, with a view of Victoria's breathtaking Inner Harbour."

"That harbor is breathtaking all right," Ben said. "Every time I explored around it there was a fifty-mile-per-hour gale blowing, which does tend to take your breath away. Of course, you'd be in some building or other, behind glass, so maybe they just mean it's pretty."

I was still reading. "I could also have French polish and paraffin."

"I know what French polish is," Maggie said, "but what's the paraffin for?"

"They don't say. It's another of those unexplained treats. But let me tell you all about the manicure! It includes their signature hot stone hand and arm massage."

"I could do that here, too," Ben said, "if we had a forge to heat the stone."

"I'm sure they use a microwave, dear," Maggie said. "Well, I'm not sure, but I don't see what else they could use."

"We can't do that," I said. "We don't have a microwave."

"But I do," Maggie said. "I'd be quite willing to let you heat stones in it."

"Oh, I think I'll pass on the manicure," I said. "It sounds like too much trouble. Maybe I'll have their hydrotherapy treatment, which means immersing myself in a tub and letting jets massage my body. That's only ninety dollars."

Ben groaned again.

"Or I could get my lashes and brows tinted and a makeup application."

"You don't wear makeup," Ben protested.

"You should come with me," I said. "They do manicures and pedicures for men, as well as facials. It says here your face would be 'deeply cleansed and hydrated using organic skin care products. And aromatic hot towels are used during the treatment, providing a calming environment.' You'd also get a hot stone hand and arm massage."

The thought of Ben undergoing that kind of pampering made Maggie and me both laugh. Ben was laughing, too, and I knew my own lack of interest in what the spa had to offer meant the tease was over. He knew perfectly well I wasn't going to the spa, however relaxing it might be.

Reading about the services it offered, however, had reminded me of something else I'd been thinking of doing over the past couple of years. It wouldn't take me away from Adriana, but it was definitely appropriate to celebrating a big birthday.



The next morning, Ben announced that he was going to take a truckload of produce to the grocery store in Mora Bay. Though I didn't much like riding in Bouncing Blue Betsy, I said, "Do you mind if I come with you? I have some errands to do, and we could have lunch at the Yellow Duck afterward."

"That's where we had supper last night," Jason said, looking up from his buckwheat pancake. Jody had spread raspberry jam on hers, folded it and was eating it like a sandwich. "We looked at the menu in the window of The Apple Tree and the food sounded really good, but it was a little too expensive. The Yellow Duck does a good veggie burger, which surprised me."

"Doesn't surprise me," I said. "Many people who move to an island do so because they want an offbeat or alternate lifestyle and one of the unconventional things you can choose is vegetarianism. So you can sometimes get better vegetarian food on an island than you can in a big city. Or so Maggie tells me, though I don't think she's sampled vegetarian food in any cities other than Vancouver and Victoria."

"And you haven't experienced life on any other island," Ben said, "so you can stop pontificating." He smiled to let me know he was teasing.

"Well," I said, "you pontificate about ancient Rome, so I thought I'd give it a try."

He nodded. "I do, don't I?" He rose and headed for the mud room. "Let's go to Mora Bay after coffee break."

It wasn't until he'd gone out to the garden that I realized I'd spent quite a few years living on another island – Vancouver Island. But Vancouver Island was large enough to be a small country.

When Ben backed Betsy up to the grocery store's unloading dock, I got out and walked up the alley to the main drag and headed toward Saxon Services. According to the sign in their window, Bill Saxon was a realtor and a notary public. Nita Saxon was a travel consultant. For all I knew, they might offer other services, like cat grooming, tax returns and baby-sitting. Their office reminded me of clients I'd dealt with in the legal practice where I'd worked in Victoria. These clients were involved in so many ventures that I'd taken to calling them 'Mrs. Thompson's Airline, Screen Door, and Cake Decorating Company.' The clients were not amused, and neither was my boss, but I didn't hang around long enough to suffer any consequences.

In Saxon Services, I asked Nita for a brochure or two on summer cruises to Alaska. She added all the information she had in her head, as I knew she would, so it was noon before I made my way back to the parking lot. I found Ben and Duff there, leaning against Blue Betsy's hood and enjoying the sunshine while they talked.

"Get your errands finished?" Ben asked. "Let's go for a hamburger and a beer. I'm starved."

The three of us found a table on the deck and settled down to enjoy a leisurely beer, delivered to us by Mitch, the owner. I watched Mitch and Ben carefully to see if they were passing silent messages to one another, but they were so casual, I was convinced it was an act. I was fairly sure that if Ben was throwing a surprise party for me, it would be at the Yellow Duck.

Ben took a long drink of beer and sat back with a happy sigh. Then he looked at the brochures beside my mug. "More information on spas?"

"No, I've decided I'm not going to a spa." Duff was sitting across from me, looking puzzled, so I explained that I had a bucket list and wanted to pick one of the items to celebrate my sixtieth birthday. I waved the brochures. "I'm looking into a cruise to Alaska. I've always wanted to see all of the British Columbia west coast."

Duff, still looking somewhat confused, said, "Ben, don't you think you should..."

Ben interrupted. "I thought you'd want to spend your birthday with me, at Holly Haven."

Guilt feelings immediately flooded my mind. Then I realized he'd grabbed at any comment he could think of to stop Duff from ruining the surprise party. Just the same, I thought I'd better do more explaining. "Oh, I was planning on both of us going, Ben. We could cruise up to Alaska, then rent a car and drive back through central BC. I seem to recall you mentioning that you'd like to do that sometime."

"That was when we still lived in Victoria, and long before I built the greenhouse," Ben said. "A cruise might be fun, but I can't go in August. It would have to be later, say at the end of September."

I tucked the brochures into my bag. "We can look at these later and see what we think will work."

Duff leaned forward. "It's a great trip. I did it a few years ago, I guess before you guys moved to Adriana. I should dig out all my photographs and bring them around some night, so you can see what you're looking forward to."

I winced mentally at the thought of wading through piles of photos and decided to change the subject. Besides, Duff was trying too hard to cover up his gaffe. "Duff, have you had any experience looking after budgies? Ben's mother adopted one and we're a little worried about it living in the same house with four cats."

Duff leaned back, more relaxed now the subject of birthdays and bucket lists had been closed. "I don't think you need to worry about the cats. At least, not as long as the budgie stays in a cage. You know what? I just learned that over ten thousand birds a year die from smashing into windows." He shook his head. "Between windows and being shot by hunters, I'll bet more birds are killed by humans than by cats."

Mitch interrupted by putting down three luscious-looking cheeseburgers. "I know these aren't considered healthy food," I said, "but once in a while I love to indulge myself in one."

After his first bite, Duff said, "I found out something interesting about cats, too, when I was surfing the Net last night. Did you know that a cat was sent into space?"

I put down my cheeseburger. "I had no idea. Was this recent?"

"No," Duff said, "it was back in 1963, which is near enough to thirty-five years ago. I thought you would have heard about it. She was a French cat named Felicette, but they also called her Astrocat. France blasted her into outer space with electrodes implanted in her brain. These sent neurological signals back to earth."

"Good lord!" Ben said. "What happened to her? Did they get her back?" I was wondering the same thing and feeling sorry for her. It must have been a disorienting experience.

Duff nodded. "She survived. And she was just the first one. Other cats have gone since then."

"There are times," I said, "when I feel like sending our six cats into outer space, with no return ticket."

"You don't really mean that, Holly," Ben said.

"Of course I don't. But excuse me if I like to imagine it now and then when they're driving me crazy." Ben and Duff returned to what I guessed was the topic of conversation when I found them in the parking lot. Not being very interested in profit margins and the problems of keeping produce fresh and appealing, I concentrated on my cheeseburger. When the last bite was gone, I slumped in my chair and injected a comment into a temporary lull. "That was delicious, but I am too full!"



Duff smiled. "Here's another fact for you. It takes food seven seconds to get from your mouth to your stomach."

"So why didn't my stomach tell me it was full?"

"Would you have listened?" Ben asked.

I shook my head. "Probably not. My tongue was having way too much fun."



A month slid by, a string of mostly warm, sunny days filled with a satisfying mix of work and play for all of us, although I could sense that Jody was getting restless. She helped Ben in the greenhouse and garden and me in the house, but I knew she wanted to do something more creative.

Jason, sitting on a Garry oak branch and waiting for chance photographs, lucked in when a doe, taking a break from the herd that was browsing in the meadow, lay down below him. Caesar came along and lay down facing her and the two, deer and cat, nuzzled each other.

"That'll be a sure-fire hit as a painting," he said when he came in. His drawings were selling well at the gallery, and he'd had half a dozen requests for custom pet drawings. He had even opened a bank account, after Jody found a pile of money in their dresser and scolded him. "What if the house burns down?" she said.

Jody made one foray into creativity, but it didn't last long. She'd decided she could learn to play our piano and do it by ear rather than learning the notes. This was such a hit and miss effort that Jason moaned about being unable to concentrate on his work as he waited for her to find the right note. Not only that, but Ming kept jumping up on the piano stool and trying to push her off. She gave in gracefully, but I did hear her mutter about small towns with no colleges and computers with no voice capabilities. She didn't say it, but I suspect she could also have grumbled about cats with no ear for music.

Jason took an hour off one afternoon and invited me upstairs for a quick lesson on colored pencil painting. I finally learned what some of the little bottles in his toolbox contained. One was mineral spirits, which he used to blend both colors and pencil strokes. "The medium is translucent," he said, "which means you can work in layers and create any color you want." He picked up another bottle. "This is masking fluid. I put that on small areas, like highlights, that I want to protect while I'm working on background. And this can contains fixative."

"I think I know what that is. It 'fixes' the work you've done so it won't smudge?"

Jason nodded. "Exactly. As for other tools, a lot of them are in my head. Things like composition, color theory, perspective, anatomy, and design."

"It's a lot more complicated than I ever dreamed," I said. "It must take a long time to do a painting."

"Sometimes people ask me how I paint with pencil." He grinned. "And I say, 'very patiently.'"

I had lost patience with trying to tease Ben about my bucket list. I had a feeling he knew I was just trying to get his goat, but I didn't want to ask him and ruin his game. Or mine, for that matter. I kept hoping I'd think of something that would really get him going. Maggie swore she didn't know if he'd guessed what I was up to, and no amount of bribery, even with chocolate treats, would get her to admit to anything different.

The subject came up on Monday, after morning coffee. Ben had gone back to the greenhouse and the kids were still sitting at the table. I sensed they wanted to talk, so I made

another pot of coffee and refilled the cookie plate with oatmeal coconut chews.

"Your birthday is a week tomorrow, right?" Jason asked.

"It is," I said. "I'm sure Ben is planning a surprise, but I have no idea what it is. Probably a party. I'm beginning to feel like Ben did last year, when he turned sixty. I don't feel any older than I did last year, and, in fact, I don't feel any older than I did at thirty. So why do I need to celebrate sixty?"

Jody reached over and touched my arm. "Because it'll be fun. Don't you like surprises?"

"No, I like to know what's going to happen so I can be prepared for it."

She chuckled. "Okay, I feel much the same way. I haven't heard you talk about your bucket list for a little while."

"I really don't have one. I was just doing that to tease Ben, to make him worry that I wasn't going to be here for whatever surprise he has in mind. But I think he caught on."

"He hasn't said anything," Jason said, "but you're probably right." He stirred cream into his coffee. "We'll be here, and I hope we get to share in whatever it is."

"Oh, you will," I said, a sudden apprehension shaking my equilibrium. "Ben has adopted you, whether you realize it or not."

"But," Jason went on, "I think we need to move back to Victoria by the end of August. Jody wants to go to school, and she can't do it here."

"I hate to see you leave," I said. "It's been a blast having you here. But I know you have to get on with your lives."

"We considered Vancouver," Jody said, "but it's more expensive to live there than it is in Victoria, and I can take the courses I need at the University of Victoria." She paused. "We're really going to miss you, too, Holly."

I managed to restrain myself to a single sniff, though my eyes were wet. "I know. But you can't become a psychologist at Holly Haven, except an amateur one, of course. And you have your whole lives ahead of you; you need to accomplish something with your time that satisfies you."

"I'm already doing the work I want to do," Jason said, dunking his cookie. "What worries me is whether I can make enough for us to live on and also pay for Jody's tuition."

"Ben and I can probably lend..."

"No," said Jason firmly. "We are not going to borrow from you. We'll manage somehow. And I might get a lot more work in Victoria simply because of the much bigger population."

"We might be able to stay with our Tibetan friends for a while," Jody said. "We have other friends there, too. The trouble is, most of them are as poor as we are."

"That could be a good thing," I said, "because they'll understand how tough things are for you."

"Yeah, maybe," Jason said doubtfully.

"When you go," I said, "I'll drive you to Victoria. I can do that much. And I'll stay with friends of mine for a few days and catch up on their gossip. I can also, if you're willing, Jason, take you to various people I know and show them your work and find out how you can advertise your talent without it costing a fortune. We can ask Olivia if she knows any of the gallery owners there, too. I know she'd be more than willing to recommend you to them."

"I hadn't thought of that," Jason said. He was looking happier. "You know, it might work out pretty well."

"And Holly," Jody said, "you know I'll stay in touch with you."

"And vice versa," I said, suppressing another sniff.

Jody reached out again, fumbling until she touched my hand with hers. "Joke, Holly, that was a joke!"  
I laughed. Of course.



## Chapter XI -- Apologies

The next four days slid by like quicksilver and, on Saturday, I called the beauty salon in Mora Bay and made an appointment for early Tuesday morning, my birthday, hoping it wouldn't interfere with Ben's surprise. I had just hung up and moved to the sink to get rid of my coffee mug when a silver-gray Mercedes rolled down the driveway and stopped beside the carport. For a moment, I just stood there, staring. I couldn't believe the Fieldings had the nerve to show up again, after all the damage they had done. But there they were with their polished car, wearing linen and cotton and looking as if they should be entering an exclusive golf clubhouse rather than an Adriana farmhouse. Why on earth were they here?

There was only one way to find out. I opened the back door two seconds after they knocked and stood squarely in the doorway. "Yes?"

"We've come to see Jody and Jason," Parker Fielding said.

I didn't move. "I think you've wasted your time. I can't imagine why either of them would be willing to talk to you."

"Please," said Pamela. "Please ask them. We've come to apologize and to try to make amends for what we've done in the past."

"Apologize? I have your word on that?"

They both nodded.

"Wait here." I closed the door and hurried up the stairs. The kids were standing on the landing, looking apprehensive.

"We heard the car," Jason said, "and I thought it sounded familiar, so I looked out our bedroom window."

"What do they want?" Jody asked. "Because whatever it is, I'm not giving it to them."

"They said they want to apologize to you," I said, "and to try to make up for their past actions."

"To both of us?" Jody asked.

"That's what it sounded like."

"What do you think, Jason?" she said.

He was silent for a moment. Then he shrugged. "I guess it wouldn't hurt to hear what they have to say. It's possible they've had a change of heart, though I find that hard to believe." He gave me a fierce look. "But not up here. I don't want them breathing in my space, spreading their bad karma where I work."

"Would downstairs in the living room be an acceptable place?"

They both nodded.

"All right," I said. "I'll tell them they can come in and talk to you there." They followed me downstairs and went into the living room. The tension was so high I was sure I could feel the vibrations.

I opened the back door and invited the Fieldings to enter. They followed me into the kitchen, and I waved a hand at the living room archway. "Jason and Jody are waiting for you in there."

Parker removed his pale blue linen jacket and slung it over the back of the kitchen chair from which he'd dumped George the Magnificent on two previous occasions, then trailed after his wife into the living room.

I stood for a moment, trying to decide what to do. Make coffee? Go get Ben in case tempers flared again and we had to throw the Fieldings out? No, both those things could wait. What I

really wanted was to eavesdrop on their conversation while pretending to be doing something else.

It wasn't difficult. I opened my favorite cookbook, found the recipe for ginger snaps, and wandered around the kitchen, measuring and mixing while I listened, hoping I wouldn't get so entranced with the conversation that I messed up the cookies. But I could always fix those if I had to; I knew what the raw dough should taste like.

Pamela Fielding started. "We want to apologize to both of you for what we've put you through. We learned a lot from a psychologist we went to recently."

"We know about the psychologist," Jason said. "You were sentenced to three sessions a week for six weeks, right?" His tone was neutral but firm.

There was a slight pause before Parker said, "Yes, that's correct. How did you know about it?"

I could imagine Jason shrugging. "My lawyer told me," he said.

"Well, it's true," Pamela said, sounding flustered, "but the apology is sincerely meant. Will you accept it?"

"Sure, why not?" Jason said.

"And you, Jody?" Parker asked.

"Yes," Jody said, "but that doesn't mean I'll ever trust you again."

Another pause. I wondered if the Fieldings had expected their daughter to fall all over them merely because they'd said they were sorry. Accepting an apology was one thing. Forgiveness was another. I doubted that Jason would ever forgive them.

Finally, Parker said, "I'm sorry you feel that way. Everything we've ever done was because we care about you and wanted the best for you."

"But you apparently had no idea what the best was," said Jody. I could hear anger in her voice. "You wouldn't listen when I explained what I wanted and needed, what I knew was best for me."

"We thought you were too young to know what you needed," Pamela said. "Not only that, but with your disability, we felt you'd never be able to deal with living independently, that you'd always be alone and helpless. That's why we wanted to protect you, to make sure you were safe."

"I don't want to be safe," Jody said. "I want to be like other people and live my life."

"We're offering you the chance to do that," Parker said.

"I'm already doing it," she said.

"Not as well as you could be," Jody's mother said. "You often told us that you wanted to go to college, but you're obviously not going."

At that moment, the back door opened, and Ben hurried in, looking concerned. Before he could open his mouth, I put my fingers to my lips and pointed at the living room. He tiptoed into the kitchen, which I knew was probably useless because the people in the other room must have heard the back door slam. He slid into a kitchen chair.

"We'd like you to come home," Parker said, "at least for as long as it takes to get the kind of education you want. We'll pay for the college courses, provide board and room, and give you a generous allowance. You'd be free to come and go as you please, though we'd be more than happy to drive you places, or provide whatever other help you might need."

The silence was so long that Ben and I stared at each other in consternation, afraid that Jody was tempted to give in.

Her voice was clear. "No. I appreciate the offer, but I will never leave Jason. He's my life partner."

"But," said Parker, "he can't afford to give you the life you deserve."

"Didn't you two learn anything from that psychologist?" Jody demanded. "You're still trying to control my life!"

Pamela said, "All right, Jason can stay with us, too."

"Pamela, I don't think..." Parker did not sound pleased. He was interrupted mid-sentence by Jason.

"Not even if I was starving!" Jason snapped. "After what you've done to me, how could you ever expect me to live in your house? Jody must make up her own mind about what she wants to do. But like she said, you're still trying to control her."

It sounded like the conversation was going to deteriorate into a fight and I raised my eyebrows at Ben. He shrugged. If my lip-reading was accurate, he mouthed, "Don't interfere."

All four people in the living room were now talking at once and could not possibly have heard the cat door slam. In marched George the Magnificent, trailed by his disciple, sleek, white Cato. George sniffed the air and twitched his ears, then headed straight for Parker's blue jacket slung over a kitchen chair. He sniffed it, then turned his back. Before I could move, he'd raised his tail and sprayed copiously all over the back of the jacket.

I clapped my hands over my mouth to hold in the laughter and leaned against the counter, unable to do anything else. Ben looked at George, then at me, and buried his face in his hands. I knew by the shaking of his shoulders that he was laughing.

Just when I thought I might be able to control my glee, Cato emulated his master teacher and sprayed Parker's jacket, too.

I couldn't stand it. I hurried outside, with Ben right behind me, and we both collapsed against the pump house wall and laughed until the tears ran down our cheeks.

"Oh, Ben, what am I going to do?" I said. "I'll have to apologize to Parker for what the cats did to his jacket, and I don't think I'll be able to do it without laughing."

"I'll make the apologies," Ben said. "But I'm going to give George a special treat tonight. We still have some of that baked salmon that Cal gave us in the fridge." He blew his nose. "Well, all I can say is 'let the punishment match the offense.' That's Cicero, 106 - 43 BC."

"It seems to me you've used that one before."

"No doubt," he said. "That's the thing about those old Romans. They were smart guys. Let's go back in and make some coffee. Somebody's going to need it. Besides, those cats sprayed so much pee on the jacket it's probably dripping on the floor."

The conversation in the living room had quieted down, but was still going on while I mopped up the floor and rinsed Parker's jacket under the kitchen sink tap. "This jacket is a write-off," I said.

As Ben took the coffee can out of the cupboard, I heard Parker say, "I'm sorry we can't seem to agree, but the offer stands open, Jody. We know we were hard on you, and we want to make up for it somehow."

Parker and Pamela came into the kitchen. He reached for his jacket, then realized I was holding it over the sink. "What are you doing with that?"

Ben stopped in the middle of the coffee preparations and said, "I must apologize for our cats' behavior. One of them urinated on it."

"The same cat you threw off a chair twice," I said, unable to resist.

Parker looked at Ben, then at me, and finally at George, who was sitting beside the fridge with a smug expression on his face. Parker shook his head. "I don't believe it. Why would he do a thing like that?"

"Because you threw him off his chair, waking him out of a sound sleep," I said.

"You mean he actually remembers that?" Pamela looked astonished.

"Of course he does," I said. "He sniffed your jacket and recognized your scent, which reminded him of how you treated him. Cats are very intelligent."

"I know dogs are intelligent," she said, "but I thought cats were just lazy lumps of fur."

Parker was still staring at George. Then he turned to me. "They certainly know how to get even."

"Yes," I said. "I think you may as well say goodbye to the jacket. I've never yet found a way to get the smell of cat urine out of cloth. I'm sorry about that." I know I didn't sound very sorry, but I did the best I could.

Parker took the jacket. "I'll deal with this. And thanks for giving us space to talk to my daughter. She's being as stubborn as she ever was, but I'm hoping that in time she'll relent." He headed for the back door, followed closely by Pamela.

I watched them back out of the driveway while Ben finished prepping the coffeemaker. When I turned around, Jason and Jody were sitting at the kitchen table. Jason looked at the mess on the counter and said, "What are you making?"

"Ginger snaps," I said. "That is, if I can remember which ingredients I put in and which I didn't. I was too busy listening to your conversation to do the job right."

"My parents have a lot of nerve," Jody said. "But they did apologize. That's something I've never heard before. So the counseling sessions did that much for them."

"They must have just finished the sessions," I said. "Maybe they haven't yet understood and accepted everything the psychologist said."

"I heard you say something about cat urine," Jason said. "What happened?"

I related the exploits of George the Magnificent and his pupil, and the two kids laughed as hard as I had.

"Oh, that's priceless," Jody said, then giggled some more. "What a perfect put-down!" She reached down toward the floor. "George? Come and get petted. You should have a reward."

"He went back outside," I said, "probably to make sure your parents actually left the property. You can give him his reward tonight, before Ben gives him a fresh salmon treat." I poured four mugs of coffee and put a plate of brownies on the table. "Do you think they will ever accept the fact that you must be allowed to manage your own life? That you're perfectly capable of managing it?"

"I don't know," Jody said. "I hope so, but I'm not counting on it. At least now I can talk to them without feeling that I'm fighting for my life every second."

Jason licked brownie crumbs off his fingers. "Maybe it will be all right in time. They wanted to see my art, but I said I didn't like to show it until it was finished and framed."

Jody patted his arm. "I told them he'd sold quite a few drawings and that they should stop at the Mora Bay gallery and have a look at what's there."

"Maybe they'll buy all of them," Ben suggested.

"I don't think I'd like that," Jason said. "It might feel as if they're trying to buy me."

"Well," I said, "if that's what happens and that's how you feel, you can always do what George did."



The next day being Sunday, Maggie came over for morning coffee as usual and told us that

she'd decided to celebrate the peace treaty with the Fieldings by inviting us all over for one of her special vegetarian dinners.

"What are you going to have?" Ben asked. He always liked what Maggie cooked but still wasn't quite comfortable with contemplating a meatless main meal.

"Meat loaf," she said.

Ben blinked. "But you don't eat meat. Or have you changed your mind?"

"Of course not," she said. "I feel so much better now that I no longer eat meat."

"I don't think I would," Ben said.

"Well, we're all different, Benjamin." Maggie reached for another ginger snap. "These turned out well, considering your mind wasn't on the recipe, Holly."

Jason laughed. Both he and Jody looked more relaxed now. "I kept expecting her to burst in and defend us like a mother hen."

"I would have," I said, "but I kept reminding myself that you chicks are big enough to look after yourselves."

Ben's mind was obviously still on dinner. "But if you're making meat loaf for us, Mom, what are you going to eat?"

Maggie waved off the subject with one graceful hand. "Don't worry about it. Cal's coming for dinner, too, and he likes meat loaf, so I thought I'd cater to the two of you. I'll make something else for Jason, Jody and me."

My mind was on Tuesday. "I'm thinking of getting a tattoo for my birthday."

"Holly!" Ben was not amused.

I knew he'd react because he disliked any form of body decoration. He'd had a fit when Maggie turned up on her eightieth birthday with a ring through her nose. He only calmed down when he discovered the ring merely clipped on.

"Just a little one, maybe," I said. "Do any of you have ideas about what it should be and where it should go?"

"A kitten climbing up your ankle," Maggie said.

"A butterfly on your shoulder," Jody suggested.

"A rainbow on your cheek," Jason said.

"Oh," I said, "I don't think I want anything on my face."

"I wasn't talking about your face," Jason said, with a grin. "I was talking about your other cheek, the one you sit on."

I laughed, along with everyone else. "But then nobody would see it."

"Have anything you want," Ben said magnanimously, "but it has to be someplace I'll never see."

"But that would be anywhere on her body," Jody said. "Ben, haven't you ever heard the saying that love is blind?"

That stopped Ben for a few seconds. Then he rose and headed for the mud room. "It's time I went back to work." He stopped at the door. "When it comes to sight, the Romans knew what they were talking about. Cato the Elder once said, 'anger so clouds the mind that it cannot perceive the truth.'"

Silence reigned for a few seconds as Ben put on his boots and went out. Then Jody said in a worried tone, "I'm not sure I understood that. Is he angry?"

"Perhaps he's angry with himself," Maggie said, "because he knows what you said is right, Jody."

"Yes," I said. "He didn't know how to counter that remark, so he took the opportunity to



throw us all off the track with his favorite hobby." I got up and put my mug in the sink. "I think I'll take the tattoo off my bucket list. It certainly served the purpose."

"Do you have other things on your list?" Maggie asked. "It's only two days until you find out what surprise Ben is planning."

I shook my head. "No. I think I'll leave him in peace now. Virgil said that fortune favors the brave, but I've teased Ben enough."

Maggie looked surprised. "You've started quoting Roman writers, too?"

"No, just this once. I took Ben's list of quotes out of his shirt yesterday when I was doing laundry and that's the only one I memorized before he wanted it back."



We gathered at Maggie's house at six. The evening was mellow, and she had the patio doors open. As a result, Nicky, Caesar, and Poppy, who had followed us, sat on the patio with noses against the screen, while BJ and Doran sat on the inside. BJ whined because he wanted to go out and play. Doran growled to show the intruders who was boss of the outfit, but the intruders didn't seem worried by his posturing.

Smoke was too laid-back to care who was out or in and I'd just managed to coax him into my lap when a blur of green zoomed out of nowhere and landed on the arm of my chair.

I started, but Smoke was too comfortable to do more than voice a tiny little meow in protest. "Hello, Pete," I said to the budgie. "I didn't know you were allowed out of your cage."

"Bad boy!" he said, and hopped up on my shoulder.

"I've been letting him out for part of every day." Maggie handed Ben and Cal each a beer. "I had no intention of giving him any more freedom than that, but he got along so well with all the fur-balls that I decided he might as well stay out. I do still put him in the cage at night though."

"Cats are night hunters," Ben said thoughtfully. "I suppose they might be more inclined to stalk him at night."

"Oh, that wasn't the reason," Cal said. "He's just too darn social. Maggie and I leave the bedroom door open so the cats and BJ can come and go. Pete didn't like it that we wanted to sleep when he still felt like partying, so he'd tramp around the pillows and walk on our heads and swear a blue streak. The only way we could get any sleep was to put him in the cage and cover him up."

Jody, who was sitting on the floor and running her fingers through Shaz's soft, thick fur, said, "He sounds fearless. Amazing for such a tiny bird."

"Pretty boy!" Pete chirped. He walked around to the back of my neck, and I could tell by the yanking on my scalp that he was either trying to pull hair out or climb up my braid.

I said to Jason, who was sitting beside me, "Please, can you get that bird out of my hair?"

Jason got up and went around behind the couch. There was more pulling on my hair and considerable swearing from Pete. "Dammit! Bad boy! Oh, hell!" Jason carried him around and put him back on my shoulder.

"Oh, I don't know if that was a good idea," I said.

But Pete had decided my braid wasn't fun anymore. He hopped down and stood on Smoke, who had succumbed to the urge for a nap. For the next few minutes, he seemed content to wander around on Smoke and pick at the cat's fur.

"Automatic flea catcher," I said. "Very useful."

"He's much more than that," Maggie said. "He's also an automatic dog feeder."

"Oh, come on!" Ben said. "How could he do that?"

"I'll show you," Maggie said, and went over to the kitchen counter. She took a small bag of dog kibble from a cupboard. As soon as he heard the rattle of the bag, BJ quit yearning for his pals on the other side of the screen and trotted over to her. Pete abandoned Smoke and flew onto the counter. Maggie spilled a small handful of kibble in front of him. Pete picked up a piece in his beak, waddled to the edge of the counter and dropped the kibble into BJ's waiting jaws. By the time the dog had swallowed the first piece, Pete was back with another one.

"It works like a charm." Maggie stood back and watched. "I just say, 'repeat as needed' and they carry on like that until all the kibble is gone."

Cal said, "Maggie, it's starting to smell really good in here. Does that mean dinner is almost ready?"

"It does," she replied. "I'm just going to drain the green beans and toss the salad."

"I'd come and help," I said, "but I have a cat in my lap."

"I'll do it." Jason wandered into the kitchen area and began tossing the salad. Blue Eyes, who had been flaked out in a patch of sunlight on the carpet followed him in. By this time Pete had finished feeding BJ and had flown back to the gathering in the living room. He lit on the floor in front of Shaz, and I held my breath.

I needn't have worried. She put out a paw and touched him gently and he chirped at her. She seemed to be using her paw to explore this cheeky little bird. It was a playful move, not an attack about to happen.

"Doran doesn't seem to be paying any attention to Pete," I said. "He's the cat I was most concerned about since he's as much of a ruler in this house as George is in ours."

"I don't know if my words did any good," Maggie said, "but when I brought Pete home, I explained to Doran that the bird was my friend, too, and that he had a right to live in the house." She pulled a meat loaf out of the oven. "Doran simply ignores Pete most of the time. When he does glance at the bird, the expression on his face seems to say that Pete isn't worth noticing."

"Well," Ben said, "if Doran can't eat him, I guess he's right that the bird is beneath his notice." Ben sniffed the air. "But that meat loaf is sure worth noticing."

Maggie pulled another pan out of the oven.

"How come you have two meat loaves?" Cal asked.

"One is for carnivores." Maggie smiled. "The other is for vegetarians."

"How do you know which is which?" Ben said. "I don't want to eat the vegetarian one if there's meat available."

"Not a problem," Maggie said. "The carnivores' loaf has salsa spread on top. The vegetarian one has sliced black olives on top." She picked up Pete and put him in the cage.

We gathered around the table and helped ourselves to salad, green beans, and the appropriate meat loaves. Maggie was flooded with compliments. Ben said there was no mistaking the taste of good ground beef. Cal agreed with him. Jody pronounced the vegetarian loaf the best she'd ever eaten. Topping off the main course with a dessert of fresh-picked blackberries over vanilla yogurt meant that we waddled back to our seats.

Jason and Jody cleared the table, put the food away and let Pete out of his cage. "Why did you put him in the cage during dinner?" Jody asked, as Pete rode her shoulder back to her favorite position on the floor.

"If I hadn't caged him," Maggie said, "he'd have been hopping around the table, helping himself to food off all the plates and, cute as he is, we didn't need that." She shook her head. "The only time I let him out during a meal, he walked through my mashed potatoes and then

through the butter. I managed to catch him before he landed on the carpet."

Ben eyed the bird. "Maybe I could teach one of the Araucana hens to live in the house. I don't know if she'd learn to talk, though."

"No," I said. "No, no, and no. I don't need any more animals competing for the dominant role in my house."

Ben grinned. "Just checking." He rose. "Cal, I've been thinking about putting an automatic watering system in the greenhouse. Do you want to come and see what you think of my ideas?"

"Sure," Cal said.

The two men strolled out the back door and headed for the greenhouse, trailed by two dogs and two cats.

Maggie poured more tea for Jason, Jody, and me. "Holly, you didn't say whether you liked your meat loaf."

"I had both kinds," I said, "and I didn't dare say anything in case I started laughing and ruined your joke."

"And what was the joke?" Jason asked.

"They were exactly the same," I said, "except for salsa on one and olives on the other."

"But Ben and Cal both said how delicious the meat was," Jody protested.

Maggie laughed. "They tasted meat because they expected to taste meat. That was my theory before I started making this meal, and now I've proved it."

"Besides," I said, "meat loaves have so much seasoning that no one could taste meat anyway."

"That's true," Maggie said. "This loaf contained cheese, eggs, tomato sauce, chopped onion, and whole wheat breadcrumbs, which is normal for most meat loaf recipes. I added fresh baby spinach, mashed cooked carrots and grated zucchini."

"What else?" Jason asked.

"Ground flaxseed, ground walnuts, olive oil, and garlic. Also, Italian seasoning and sage. The walnuts and olive oil give it a rich taste that resembles meat and the whole, as Holly said, is dominated by the Italian seasoning and sage."

"Can I try some on the cats?" I asked.

"Of course," Maggie said, "but I doubt they'll be interested. You may have noticed that they didn't gather around the table during dinner the way they usually do."

I took one of the loaf containers from the fridge, spooned a little of the loaf into a cat dish and offered it to Doran. He sniffed for a moment, then tossed his head, switched his gorgeous plume of a tail, and marched away.

"He knows there's no meat in that," Maggie said.

"Let's hope he doesn't tell Ben and Cal," Jody said.

"He won't," I said. "The main feline philosophy is 'what's in it for me' and Ben wouldn't thank him for the knowledge. So he won't squeal."

Jody had moved to the couch to sit beside Jason. Pete was on her shoulder, snuggling under her cloud of wavy brown hair. "Seriously," she said, "how does Doran know there's no meat in something if he doesn't taste it?"

"Oh, good," I said. "You've given me a chance to show off my cat lore. It's too bad Duff isn't here. He'd call this a weird fact. He has so much fun collecting them." I put down my teacup. "Cats have something like two hundred million odor-sensitive cells in their nostrils. Humans only have about five million. So, if there had been even a shred of meat in that dish, he'd have smelled it."

"Wow," Jason said. "That's quite a difference. But why didn't he taste it to make sure?"

"Because," I said, "cats have only about four hundred and seventy taste buds compared to the more than nine thousand for us. That's why cats depend more on their sense of smell than taste."

Jody giggled. "I don't think Ben and Cal were paying much attention to either."

"No, they weren't," Maggie said. "They made assumptions, as we humans are so prone to do. But we won't tell them that."

"Nor should we," I said. "They thoroughly enjoyed what they assumed was meat loaf and they'll enjoy the memories of it for some time. Let's not spoil it for them."



## Chapter XII -- Surprises

I began feeling nervous about my appointment as soon as I woke up on Tuesday morning. How would it look? How would it feel? What would Ben think? But, as usual, I had no time to lie in bed worrying. George was trying to pry the pillow out from under my head, Ming weighed my chest down while he stared into my eyes, his nose a bare inch from mine, and Nicky was licking any bare part of me he could find.

"All right, guys." I struggled out from under the covers, scattering cats, and climbed into my dressing gown. "Breakfast coming up." A parade of six tails, straight up, and a seventh that was wagging, led me to the kitchen, where I automatically filled food and water dishes. Prepping the coffeemaker was the next important thing. I needed a shot of caffeine to wake me up. I headed for the bathroom, but Ben had beaten me to it, and I went into the bedroom and eyed my pillow with longing. However, the alarm clock told me there was no time for a nap, so I made the bed instead.

When Ben emerged from the bathroom, I was waiting at the door for my turn. He grabbed me, put his arms around me and said, "Happy birthday!"

"Thank you. Are you going to tell me now what the surprise is?"

He grinned. "Later. Much later."

When I finally made it back to the kitchen, washed, dressed, and feeling more human, there were birthday cards beside my plate at the table. Jason, Jody, and Ben were bustling around making breakfast.

"Sit, Holly," Jason said. "You're not allowed to work today."

"If that's what birthdays are worth, I'll have several every month." I sat down and Ben poured a coffee for me. The first card was from him. It was decorated with flowers and fruit and said, 'Happy sixtieth! May your garden always bloom.'

"I'm not sure I like being sixty," I said. "It feels old."

"It's not old at all," Ben said, putting a plate of bacon and eggs in front of me. "That's only sixteen Celsius, you know."

I groaned but had to laugh. Maybe the metric system of measurement had some advantages after all.

The next card was from Jason and Jody. Jason had made it from heavy drawing paper and, on the front, had sketched a small portrait of all six cats sprawled in various poses on Ben's big armchair.

"Oh, Jason, that's a wonderful card. I think I'll get it framed."

"Eat your breakfast, Holly," Ben urged. "Don't you have an appointment at nine-thirty?"

I obediently took a mouthful of scrambled eggs. The last card was from Maggie, rather more conservative than I expected from her, but at least it said nothing about my age. "No presents?" I asked. Usually, on birthdays, we exchanged gifts at breakfast.

"There's not enough time without rushing through them," Ben said. "You'll have to leave soon."

"You're right," I said. "Besides, Maggie and Cal aren't here." I glanced at my watch. "I've got time for one more quick coffee."

Ben jumped up to get the coffee pot and, as he was pouring, the phone rang. "I'll get it," he said, putting the pot down on the stove and rushing for the phone. I wondered if this call was about the surprise he'd been working on, and whether he'd wanted to get me out of the house

before it happened.

But, after a moment, he said, "Jody, it's your father. He'd like to speak to you."

"Now what?" she muttered, as she made her way to the phone. Jason rolled his eyes.

I sipped my coffee and hoped the call would end soon. There was no way I was leaving before I found out what he wanted, even if I was late for my appointment. When she was still on the phone five minutes later, I grabbed my bag and car keys and put my shoes on so I could make a quick getaway.

Jody hung up and came back to the table. Her smile was brilliant.

"What?" I said urgently, leaning forward.

"It's incredible!" she exclaimed. "My parents finally got it. When they left here on Saturday, they stopped at the gallery and looked at Jason's drawings."

"What did they think of them?" Jason asked.

"They were blown away by his talent," Jody said, her tone exultant. "When Olivia told them how many she'd sold, they could hardly believe it." She stopped for a breath. "My father actually admitted they were totally wrong about Jason, especially suspecting him of taking drugs and drugging me. He apologized again and again for getting Jason arrested."

"This is wonderful news," I said.

"It's fantastic," Jody said. "He even said he now realizes I made a good choice for a partner."

"So, they have finally accepted the fact that you're an adult and able to run your own life," Ben said. He was beaming.

"Not only that," Jody said. "They've set up an annuity, with no strings attached. It will pay me enough so Jason and I can afford to rent an apartment and I can go to college." She flung her arms around Jason's neck, and he held her tight.

"No strings?" he said. "You had no problem accepting it?"

"I think I'm entitled to it," she said. "If my eyes functioned, if I were a normal child, there would have been no question that they'd pay for my college education and living expenses while I was there."

"Over the long haul, this will amount to quite a lot more than just a college education," Jason said.

"I still think I'm entitled," she said. "I'm their only child and they have a ton of money." She put her head on his shoulder. "I doubt they'll even miss what they're giving me. Does this bother you?"

He brushed her hair back from her forehead. "I don't want to be a kept man."

"You won't be," she said. "It's enough to pay rent and college fees. You'll still be responsible for all the important things, like food and art supplies and a computer with all the gadgets I need."

"Hot damn!" Jason said, finally allowing himself to celebrate. "It'll be so great to have our own place. What's even better is that you can go to school. We need to go to Victoria right away and get you registered."

"Not today," I pleaded. "Promise? I'm going to miss you both and it's too soon to start."

"And you'll be late for your appointment, if you don't get out of here right now," Ben said.

"Oh hell!" I headed for the door. "Keep Nicky in. I don't want him chasing the car down the road. Considering the state it's in, he'd probably catch me."

Two minutes later I was on my way to Mora Bay, too thrilled about the Fieldings' gift to Jody and Jason to worry about what I intended to do to myself.



"Are you sure you want to go through with this?" Wendy stood behind the chair in her beauty salon, hefting my long braid in her hand and staring at me in the mirror.

"I've been thinking about it for a long time. And it's scary, but yes, I want to do it. Well, I think I do."

Wendy frowned. "It'll take forever to grow back if you change your mind."

I took a deep breath. "I'll take the risk. It's time for a change."

She cut my braid off at shoulder level and I felt as if my head was going to float away without all that hair weighing it down. "What do you want to do with this?"

"I guess I could stuff a pillow with it."

Wendy shook her head. "No, don't do that. If you ever want a hair extension, we could use it that way. But I have a better suggestion. Leave it with me and I'll donate it to the Cancer Foundation for wigs for people who lose their hair from chemo."

"That's a fine idea. I'll leave it with you."

It seemed to take forever to go through the processes of washing, cutting, styling, and coloring and I refused to look in any mirrors, terrified of what I might see. For one thing, now my hair would be all black, the way it had been when I was younger. I'd gotten used to the gray. Would I miss it? Would I look odd without it?

Finally, the blow-drying was done, and I had no choice but to look. I was amazed. "It's got some natural curl in it! Or did you perform a magic trick?"

"No magic. You do have some natural curl. You just didn't know it because that braid was so heavy it pulled the hair straight."

I couldn't stop smiling. Wendy had done a sort of pixie cut and my shining black hair curled softly around my face.

Wendy was smiling, too. "You look ten years younger, Holly. Maybe more."

"That's what I think, too, but I'm glad it was you who said it."

The enormity of what I had done didn't hit me until I was in the car and on my way home. I'd been wearing my hair in a braid, nearly long enough to sit on, for the last thirty years. Would I ever get used to feeling light-headed?

It was noon by the time I parked in the carport. I hadn't given a single thought to what I'd make for lunch, but it wouldn't be much. Ben always took me out for dinner on my birthday and I was sure that wouldn't change.

He met me at the back door and his jaw dropped, literally. He stood there staring at me, his mouth open, for a long minute. I turned slowly around so he could see the curls on the back of my neck as well as those framing my face. When I'd completed the circle, I was astonished to see that he had tears in his eyes.

"All that lovely hair," he said. "Gone."

"I didn't know you cared."

"Of course I care!" He scowled at me. "One of the things I've always loved about you was that long gorgeous braid of hair."

"It'll grow back."

"Sure," he said, "but that's going to take years and years."

"You aren't planning on leaving, are you?" I asked. "As long as you're going to hang around, I'll grow it back if that's what you want, and you can watch."

Ben blew out a breath and began to smile. "Oh, I'm not going anywhere. And, you know

what, that length looks really good on you." He put his arms around me, and we hugged. Then he stood back and stared at my head again. "It's just the shock."

"Better than a tattoo, though, right?" I stepped past him and headed into the kitchen.

"I'd be really upset if you got a tattoo." He followed me in.

"I know." The kitchen was tidy, the dishes done. "What shall we have for lunch?"

"Don't worry about it," he said. "Maggie said she'd make something and bring it over. Cal's helping her."

"We'll be lucky if Cal doesn't eat half of it before they get here."

"He won't. Jason and Jody are helping, too."

I had barely time to put my bag in the bedroom before the four of them trooped in the back door, carrying covered dishes. They put the dishes on the table.

Maggie turned and held out her arms. "Happy birthday!" Then she dropped her arms and stared. "You look fantastic!"

I was feeling better and better about my hair cut. Maggie hugged me and when she stepped back, Cal was staring at me, a puzzled expression on his face. "Holly, you look different somehow."

"She got a haircut," Jason said. "The braid is gone. And so is the gray."

"Oh," Jody said, "can I see?"

I walked over to her and lifted her hands to my hair. She was smiling as she touched the curls and waves with those delicate, sensitive fingers. "I'll bet you feel cooler and lighter, Holly."

"Come on," Maggie said. "It's time for lunch."

"And presents," Ben said. He seemed excited. Maybe the surprise was going to happen now. Maybe it wasn't going to be a party after all.

"But lunch first," Cal said firmly.

Lunch was a picnic: potato salad, green salad, sliced ham, and deviled eggs. Jody got out the hot mango pickles and we had another good laugh at the expense of the poor wasp who'd eaten some at the last picnic. When we were finished Ben made a fresh pot of coffee. I went off to gaze at my new haircut in the bedroom mirror and, when I came back, there was a small pile of gifts beside my mug, along with the mail.

"The postman was early today," Ben said. "Open my gift last. It's a big one."

"It doesn't look big," I said. "It's just an envelope."

"Sometimes big things come in small packages," Ben said. "And yes, I know that saying has been around for a hundred years, but it's true."

I opened the gift from Maggie and Cal. "Oh, it's beautiful!" It was a small hanging, made of wool. The scene was red arbutus trees on a sandstone slope, the blue sea beyond.

"Maggie designed it," Cal said.

"And you wove it from Angora goat wool," I said. It was easy to see why Cal had won prizes for his weaving in exhibitions. For a man who looked clumsy and worked with metal most of the time, he had great talent.

The next gift was signed 'Jason and Jody.' I'd suspected what it was the moment I felt the shape and weight through the paper. I wasn't disappointed, when I ripped the paper off, to see Jason's drawing of George. It was framed in a thin, black metal frame which emphasized the black in George's tabby fur.

"This is wonderful," I said. "You could easily have sold this, but I'm glad you didn't." Now I was the one with tears in my eyes. George looked so alive I could imagine him getting up from his lazy pose and walking from the picture to my lap.



"Olivia framed it," Jason said.

"I'm glad we didn't sell it," Jody said. "We don't need the money because we're rich now!"

"You always were," Maggie said.

The next two gifts were fairly predictable, based on past birthdays. One contained two pounds of my favorite coffee beans and was signed by all six cats. The paw prints on the enormous tag might have been real, but the names beside the prints had certainly been written by a human. Nicky gave me a bottle of my favorite single malt scotch.

"Leave the mail," Ben said, as I reached for half a dozen envelopes that looked as if they might be cards, "and open my present now."

I stared at it for a moment before I opened the flap. What could he possibly have bought for me that would fit in an envelope? He was always complaining that I was a difficult person to buy gifts for unless they had something to do with eating or cats. Well, it could be a gift certificate, but who in Mora Bay sold them?

It was my turn to experience shock when I opened the envelope and slid out an airline ticket to Tibet. After I got my breath back, I said, "Tibet? Really truly? But Ben, this must have cost a fortune!" How was I going to tell him that I didn't really want to fly to Tibet, that I'd only been teasing?

"I remortgaged the farm," he said. "It's worth it, Holly. You only live once."

The others were all exclaiming over this gift, suggesting what I should wear, how much film I should take with me or, even better, buy a digital camera. I turned the ticket over and over in my hands. Maggie was just telling me to buy a small carrier for the Tibetan mastiff puppy I must certainly bring back, when something about the ticket caught my attention and calmed my internal panic.

"Ben," I said, "why is this ticket printed on the kind of paper Scott West uses to make certificates? That's not what airline tickets are usually made of."

He leaned back in his chair and laughed. "Gotcha!"

Cal grinned at me. "You're right. I was with Ben when we went to the *Advocate* to see if Scott could do something like this."

I took another deep breath. "And you didn't remortgage the farm, did you?"

Ben laughed again. "Nope."

My laughter was tinged with a good deal of relief. "I'd like to kill you, but I won't because I know I deserved that."

Ben reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a set of car keys. He handed them to me. "Your real present is outside."

I took the keys warily. "Is this another joke?"

"No," he said. "This is for real."

"But we can't afford a new car either."

"It's not new," Ben said, "and I got a real deal on it, thanks to Cal."

"I didn't see it when I came back from Mora Bay." I was still suspicious.

Cal rose. "Come on, Holly, and have a look. I drove it across the lawn and parked it behind the workshop."

Since the 'lawn' was just hard ground growing a lot of wild grasses, I knew that wouldn't have hurt a thing. All of us trooped outside and walked around the car port and workshop to the rear of the building. And, sure enough, a car was parked there. A big car. A dark-blue Jeep Cherokee, with a squared-off body like a station wagon, and four doors.

"It looks new," I said.

Ben shook his head. "It's a 2001. You remember that friend of Cal's in Ellis Bay who just died? The one where Maggie got Pete? It was his car."

"Yeah," Cal said. "Mervin bought it six years ago because he'd always wanted a Jeep and he knew he wasn't going to live long. But he never drove it much."

"It looks great," I said, "but it must have cost way more than a ticket to Tibet."

"Mervin had no family," Cal said, "and he didn't have a will. The Public Trustee just wanted to get rid of everything as quick as he could." He held the driver's door open for me. "Take her for a spin, Holly. I tuned her up."

My family stood back, with Ben holding Nicky's neck fur, while I got in and maneuvered the car to the driveway, then across the cattle guard and onto Macklin Road. It felt like a new car, too, smooth and steady, with lots of oomph. The engine was quieter than Ming's purr. By the time I'd driven five miles toward Mora Bay, I was over feeling nervous and beginning to enjoy myself. This was going to be way more fun to drive than the old Chevy. I turned around in somebody's driveway and drove back to Holly Haven. Nicky barked when I stopped and bounced around, tail wagging, when I got out.

"Sorry, Nicky, I haven't had time to fill this car with doggy treats." I looked at the others and realized I hadn't stopped grinning since I'd driven out the gate. "What a birthday! A new look and a new vehicle all in one day. Not to mention all the other gifts. I'll have to think of a name for this girl."

"Something that goes with Bouncing Blue Betsy," Ben said. "They're the same color, even if not the same shade." His old truck was a pale blue.

I gave him a hug. "I know you said you got a deal but, just the same, I bet it blew the budget to pieces."

"Wrecked it totally," he said, looking not at all upset. "Well, Holly, six people will fit in this car, so you can drive us all to dinner tonight."

"Aha! I knew we'd have dinner out somewhere."

"But one of us will drive home," Maggie said, "because you'll be having a few drinks to celebrate."

"I'll do it," Jason said, "I don't drink anyway."

"Do you have a driver's license?" I asked, suddenly remembering he hadn't mentioned learning to drive when he'd told me his history.

"License?" he said. "I thought you didn't need one on Adriana."

I didn't push it. He might have one, and might not, but I decided that was something I really didn't need to know.

"So where are we going for dinner?" I asked, as we went back into the house.

"The Yellow Duck," Ben said, as if surprised that I needed to ask.

"I wanted to go to The Apple Tree," Maggie said, "because it's got such good vegetarian food, but you know what these men are like when it comes to beer and hamburgers."

"I don't mind," I said. "The food is good at the Yellow Duck, too, only not as much variety. And it's going to be a nice evening, so we can sit out on the deck."

"That's a good idea," Ben said.

I made more coffee, well content with what the day had brought. Ben's surprise had turned out to be a smash hit and I had to hand it to him for keeping the secret so well. I guessed now that he'd been talking to Mitch at the Yellow Duck to make sure the bar would have a good supply of my favorite scotch. And Duff had known, of course, because he made it his business to know everything that happened on the island. Maggie had agreed when I guessed there might be

a surprise party, but with Ben being so clever now at keeping secrets, I decided he'd put her up it.

"What time is our reservation?" I asked Ben.

"I told Mitch five o'clock," he said. "I know that's early, but I don't want to be late home tonight. I have to get a load of greens into Mora Bay first thing in the morning."

"Fine with me," I said. That still gave me time to decide where to display my new wall hanging and my beautiful painting of George.



At four-thirty, the six of us piled into my new Jeep and headed for Mora Bay. Maggie had locked BJ in her house, and I'd locked Nicky in ours, leaving him with an expression on his furry face that said his world had come to an end.

"If you put them in the same house, they'd be company for each other," Jody said.

"That's true," Ben said, "but when they're together and upset about being left out of whatever we're doing, they start ripping the place apart." He turned to look at me. "Have you decided on a name for this Jeep yet?"

"How about Jeepers Creepers?"

Ben groaned. "Will you please get into the twenty-first century? Besides, if you're going to swear at her, that name is too long."

"So is Bouncing Blue Betsy."

"It was you who named her that," Ben protested. "I just call her Betsy. Among other things."

"Okay," I said, slowing down for a sharp curve, "I'm going to call this one Miranda. And no, I don't have a single cute reason for doing so. I just like the name Miranda."

"It's a nice name, dear," Maggie said. "And she waltzes very well around these curves."

The parking lot at the Yellow Duck was rather full, but I found a spot fairly close to the door, and we wandered in, taking our time because we were five minutes early. So early, in fact, that when I opened the inner door, the lights weren't on yet. I stopped in mid-step, puzzled. But why should the lights be out? Mitch kept the place open all day.

Then the lights came on, and a chorus of voices yelled, "Surprise!"

Stunned and blinking, I looked around at a crowd of familiar, smiling faces. For a minute, I couldn't speak. Then I looked at Ben, who was grinning, and said, "I thought Miranda was the big surprise."

He poked me in the ribs. "So who is it in this family that can't keep a secret?"

I hugged him. "Not you, obviously."

Someone tapped me on the shoulder, and I turned to see my sister, Ginna, and her husband, Tom. She smiled as she reached out and touched my hair. "You've aged to perfection, just like me. Your hair is great, and we look almost like twins now. It was about time you updated yourself."

We hugged and I rubbed Tom's polished pate. "Did you bring Jeremy and Clyde? Are you staying with us?"

"Only for tonight and tomorrow, so we hired a cat-sitter. Besides, we didn't want to leave them in the car while we partied the night away." Tom looked over my shoulder. "And are these two young people Jason and Jody?"

I introduced them and Ginna said, "Come on, we'll do the rounds and introduce you to anybody you haven't met."

They disappeared into the crowd, and I nearly collapsed when the next person to wish me

happy birthday was my Aunt Ruth.

More hugs. "You came all the way from Dawson Creek just for my birthday?"

"Well, sure," she said, "I haven't seen you for ages. Besides, you know I love parties."

I knew. She sounded like she was already working on her second rye and ginger. "Where are you staying? There's no room left at my house unless you want to sleep on the couch. Which you're more than welcome to do."

"Don't you worry about it, kiddo. I drove down with a girlfriend and we're staying at a motel."

Good, that meant she had somebody to look after her. In the next second, she was edged out by two more of my favorite people, Ben's son, Gareth, and Sue, his tall, blonde wife.

"Gareth! Sue! It's wonderful to see you. Did you bring Beanbag?" Beanbag was their corgi, a good-natured dog who was terrified of cats.

"He's sleeping in the car." Gareth said.

"I was going to bring you an African violet," Sue said, "but I couldn't bear to think of what you'd do to it."

I hugged her. "You're teasing. You know perfectly well my black thumb would kill the poor thing in the first six months."

"Of course, I'm teasing," she said. "I remember what you did to the jade plant. And no doubt everybody is telling you the same thing, but your haircut has taken ten years off your age."

Gareth pulled Maggie out from behind Ben and gave her a hug. "Hi, Granny!"

"Hi yourself," she said. She turned to me. "They're staying with me tonight, by the way. How do you feel now about being sixty, Holly?"

"After all the excitement and compliments today has brought, it doesn't hurt a bit."

"Birthdays never bother me," Maggie said, "probably because I don't pay too much attention to them. To me, old age is always fifteen years older than I am."

"You're not sixty," Cal said to me. "You're just a twenty-year-old with forty years of experience."

"I love your attitude," I said. "I still feel twenty inside."

"We all do," Cal said. He took Maggie's elbow. "Come on; let's go find where we're supposed to sit for dinner. Gareth, you and Sue come and sit with us."

I thought there would be no more family guests, but I was in for a shock. The next couple facing me was Ben's brother, Dave, and his wife, Betsy. "And you two came from Moose Jaw, just for my birthday?" I said, after the hugs were over.

"Well, no," Dave said, "I like to see my brother once in a while, too."

"I wish you could stay with us," I said, "but we're all out of room unless you want to sleep on the floor. I don't think both of you will fit on the couch."

Dave smiled down at me. "All taken care of. I'm sleeping on your couch and Betsy is sleeping on Maggie's couch. We are going to have one humongous family gathering tomorrow."

I turned to Ben. "You certainly did a lot of work to organize this. It's great."

"No problem," he said, "it's only ruined my budget for the next two years."

"That doesn't have to be a problem either," said another familiar voice. "He can come back to work for me. He's obviously staying current with cost accounting procedures." It was Rusty Bell, Ben's old boss in Victoria, and his wife, Jean. When we'd moved to Adriana five years ago, they'd bet us a hundred dollars we wouldn't last a year.

With them was a young woman in her early twenties who turned out to be Jean's niece, Kaitlin.

After introductions and other pleasantries, including compliments on my short hair, Kaitlin said, "What does it feel like to be old?"

"Kaitlin, that's rude!" Rusty exclaimed.

"She asked an honest question," I said. "Kaitlin, it feels just the same as being young. The only difference between you and me is that I've had more colds and eaten more chocolate."

She blinked at that, but said no more, and Rusty led her and Jean toward the bar, promising to bring me back a scotch.

The next person to wish me a happy day was Duff, who shook my hand and said, "I have another weird fact for you. Just like a banana, the older you get, the sweeter you are."

For once my brain produced a quick comeback. "So how long before I become black and mushy?"

He threw back his head and roared. "Good one, Holly! Many happy returns. And at the next trustee meeting, we'd better talk about the election coming up in November. Our two-year terms will be up. And I think we should all run again."

Joanna Karl, the other trustee, appeared at his elbow. "I agree. We're a good team. And if you have any doubts about running, forget them. You're not going to turn black and mushy until you're ninety. Maybe not then, either."

More people kept coming. Our neighbors, the Traffords, Dyckmans and Millers, then Shelley Norton, who had adopted two of Ming and Kaylie's kittens, and who told me that birthdays were just nature's way of telling me it was time to eat more cake. Then Betty Good from the Adriana Heritage Society, my cat family's doctor, Jerry Parker and his wife, Cindy, and Melody from the SPCA.

Rusty came back then and stuck a glass of scotch in my hand. After I'd taken my first sip, I looked up to see Scott West, my boss at the *Adriana Advocate*. He grinned down at me. "Just remember, Holly, you're not old, you're merely chronologically enhanced."

"Fine," I said, "I'll try to keep that in mind when arthritis sets in."

Scott shook his head reprovingly. "Don't think about such things. Arthritis may never happen to you, so there's no reason to waste time dwelling on the possibility."

I promised to erase the idea from my mind at once, and Scott was replaced by Robert Geraghty and Olivia Morris.

"This is a wonderful surprise," I said to Robert.

He shook my hand. "It's a pleasure to be here and to wish you many happy returns," he said. "When I got off the ferry, I went to the gallery and Olivia and I had a long discussion about Jason and his work. We decided we might as well walk over here together."

"I'm glad you did," I said, accepting a smile, a hug, and congratulations from Olivia. "If you'd like to speak to Jason and Jody, they're here. Probably seated at one of the tables by now."

"Thanks, I would very much like to do that," Robert said. "I'm staying overnight and, if it's all right with you, I'll drop in for a brief visit tomorrow before I head back to Victoria."

"I'd be delighted," I said. "Holly Haven will be overrun with family, but I'm sure you can cope."

I watched them make their way toward the bar and turned back to Ben. "Do you think those two are going to be an item?"

"Holly," Ben said, and shook his head. "How do you know they're not both already married?"

"I don't. But they go nicely together."

Ben opened his mouth but before he managed to say anything, Norm and Kris from Riggby

Island interrupted with hugs and congratulations.

"Oh, I'm so glad you came," I said. "I wish you could have brought Sir Oliver."

Norm smiled. "He wouldn't want to be here. Too many people."

"Besides," said Kris, "he has a lot to do at home. He must protect the island from intruders, you know. You'll just have to visit Riggby again."

Norm touched my arm. "Please do. Oliver is a real gift, and it was because of you and your mother-in-law that we got him."

"That's not what I'd call a hardship," I said. "I'd love to come." They walked away to look for a table. His words made me think of the gifts, of one sort or another, that several people, including me, had received in the past few months. Animals, too. Sir Oliver and Pete had both been given new homes.

Almost everyone was sitting down now. I said to Ben, "Is that it?"

He nodded. "Everybody I invited is here, plus a couple of extras. Looks like it's going to be a good party."

"It'll be a wonderful party. Thanks to you. And you know what; I don't feel old at all."

"Age doesn't matter, unless you're a cheese." Mitch, owner of the Yellow Duck, stuck a scotch into my other hand, and said, "Come on and find your seat. As the guest of honor, you need to order first, and I've got a bunch of people already agitating for food."

I laughed. "I'll relinquish the honor of eating first, Mitch. If everybody here loves food as much as I do, let them eat right now! Besides, I've got two drinks to work on."

"Your wish is my command," Mitch said.

"That's the first time anybody, including cats, has ever said *that* to me."

"Enjoy it," Mitch said. "It won't last beyond today. Your table is the one with a bouquet of yellow roses on it."

"Did you arrange for those, too, Ben?"

"Sure did."

I linked my arm through his. "It's perfect. Adriana is perfect. It's the best move we ever made." Near the bar, I noticed a bulletin board set up on an easel. I pulled Ben closer to get a better look. "Oh my God, those are pictures of me!"

He grinned. "Sure enough."

"Where did you get those awful shots of me as a teenager?"

Behind me, Ginna said, "Me, of course. I suggested to Ben that a collage of photos would be fun, and I ended up doing it."

"I've been betrayed!" I cried. "Just look at that one when I was thirteen and all braces and scowl. I want to tear it up."

"No way," Ginna said. "This is your day, and we get to see you, warts and all."

Ben pulled me toward our table.

"I bet you're going to get up and tell embarrassing stories about me," I said.

"No," he said, "but Ginna will."

I discovered I couldn't groan and laugh at the same time. "Oh well, I did it to her when she hit forty. I guess fair is fair."

Before I sat down, I looked around the room. Every one of the people who filled my life was smiling or talking, looking happy, Aunt Ruth more than most. A few miles away, my beloved fur family would be asleep, though a couple might be ripping pillows apart, and I'd see them before the night was out.

I settled into my chair, took a sip of scotch, and picked up the menu. The day had been

perfect. So much so that I found myself eager for next big birthday. Seventy might scare some people, but I couldn't think of a thing wrong with it. And who knew what surprises it might bring?



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## Books by Lea Tassie

Tour Into Danger

Cats in Clover  
Siamese Summers  
Cat Under Cover  
Cats & Crayons  
Calico Cat Caper

Charger the Soldier  
Charger the Weapon  
Charger the God  
The Missing Year  
The Case of the Copycat Killer

Deception Bay  
Deep Water  
Dire Straits

Green Blood Rising  
Red Blood Falling  
Shockwave

A Clear Eye  
Double Image  
Eyes Like a Hawk

Harvest  
Walking the Windsong  
Connections

Two Shakes of a Lamb's Tail  
Baa Baa Black Sheep, Have You Any Words?



## About the Book

When Holly Sutton learns that squatters have taken over the old house scheduled to open as a heritage museum for Adriana Island, she promises to get rid of them. But Jason and his partner, Jody, surprise her. His colored pencil artwork is brilliant, and Jody is blind. Holly and husband Ben invite them to live at Holly Haven with them and their fur menagerie. Then they all, including tabby-Siamese King George the Magnificent, must deal with Jody's parents, who believe her incapable of living unsupervised and will go to any length, including having Jason arrested for dealing drugs, to regain control of her. Meanwhile, Ben's mother, Maggie, agrees to foster an unmanageable cat from a shelter, though she fears the danger to her own four-footed clan. Looming over all is Holly's up-coming sixtieth birthday. Will she really carry out her threat to fly off to Tibet just to avoid a not-really-a-surprise surprise party?

## Author Bio

Lea Tassie grew up on an isolated homestead in northern British Columbia. Now she writes full-time in the beautiful, temperate, and very wet Pacific Coast rainforest. Her books include humor (some about cats and some about the English language), mainstream novels, and science fiction.

